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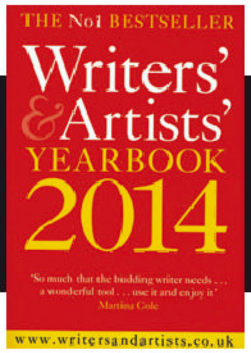
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WELCOME

Jill Mansell
promise me
16

Tina Jackson
Content Editor

Following last month's exhortation to roll up your sleeves and make a strong start on your 2023 writing projects, it doesn't do any harm to have a bit of a reality check.

Not every idea will work. False starts are inevitable. Rejections may be a fact of writing life, but there's no getting round the fact that each and every time, they (really) *hurt*. And yet, somehow, time after time we love writing so much that we pick ourselves up, and try again. It's like the lyrics to the Labi Siffre song: *You can decide to turn your face away / No matter, 'cause there's / Something inside so strong…*

With that in mind, turn the page to C.K. McDonnell's glorious piece on writing comedy. He details all the hard knocks, dead ends and times when it just wasn't funny – only to find that in the end, nothing is ever wasted as it all feeds into the writing. And check out Charlotte Rixon's publication story on p28 – rejection after rejection and for all the anguish, she wouldn't have it any other way.

What they've got in common is they kept going. Kept believing. Kept writing. And got published.

We hope you do too – we're with you every step of the way.

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Comic timing

Carla Speight

Writing funny is one of the hardest things to do well, and it can mean playing a long game. Former stand-up turned comedy writer and now novelist **C.K. McDonnell** explains how nothing in a comic writer's life is ever wasted, and how you can make comedy work in your fiction.

Comedy is a bit like terrorism. There's no one set route into it, but it invariably ends up with your family explaining to anyone who will listen that they've no idea how you'd ended up like this. I once had what my mother considers to be a proper job in IT. She could explain it to the neighbours, and they wouldn't pull sympathetic faces. People know what computers are and they're useful. Stand-up comedians on the other hand, well that's just a modern-day court jester who doesn't even get to meet important people. They should have seen it coming though. I was the weird kid who sat inside reading Terry Pratchett books when everyone else was out playing football.

It has now been twenty years since I last told someone to 'turn it off and on again' in a professional capacity and since then, I have made my living from comedy or 'comedy adjacent' activities. I was a stand-up comedian, a kid's TV writer, a gun-for-hire writing for comics on panel shows, an in-stadium announcer for a professional sports team (once described as 'The second most annoying man in British rugby' – *The Mail*), and most recently, an author. As of three years ago, an author is all I am, which if nothing else, does make my tax return a lot more straightforward to fill out. I've even grown a beard and I'm actively pursuing cardigan-wearing opportunities. Much to my mother's relief, I've hung up my clowning shoes. The neighbours know what books are. In a certain light, it's almost respectable. Almost.

It's not all fun and games

Back in what I like to think as my 'hustling' days (not like that), I had many career ups and downs. High – a show I created was nominated for a Children's BAFTA. Low – I turned up for the awards at a swanky hotel in London to discover that while I was the only guest in a tux, the waiting staff had at least put in the effort. After a while, it was easier just to go get people their drinks. High – as a stand-up, I supported my friend Sarah Millican at the Apollo. Low – also as a stand-up, in a bingo hall in Newcastle another Geordie woman, who worked on oil rigs, heckled me with a long and detailed explanation of what she would do to me as soon as I got off stage. I didn't understand almost any of it, but the accompanying terrifyingly aggressive mimes haunt me to this day. So much thrusting.

Everything comes in at some point

What is nice about being an author is that all the things I've done in my career up until this point, many of which seemed like an enormous waste of time soon after, now feel like they were useful. I've had, I'd say, maybe a dozen ideas optioned for television or radio at various points and I'd pitched countless more. I wrote successful children's TV shows, but nothing ever came of all the many, many, sitcoms I'd written. Some were full scripts I'd worked on for several years, some were not much more than rough ideas. Weirdly, I got optioned to write a sitcom based on cross-channel ferries just because I'd been in the pub after a meeting with a few TV types and we'd been discussing our first jobs. Mine had been working on the crossing between France and Ireland cleaning up vomit. If I'd have known on that particularly stormy night that the tale of a drunk man trying to hit my bucket and getting me instead would one day get optioned for TV by one of the UK's biggest production companies I might have felt a bit better about it. Only a bit though. It got in my hair.

I also had a script I'd worked on for a year that I was proud of get sabotaged by the people who were supposed to be helping me. Someone from a drama background at the production company decided to rewrite the one-page synopsis that came with the script and the feedback from the BBC, SKY and Channel 4 (the only three games in town at the time) was that it didn't feel like a comedy idea.

> *"The effort put in to being effortless is immense. Comics will work and rework material and polish it up until that seemingly off-hand remark that looks like it has just occurred to them, slays night after night, time after time."*

To this day, I'm convinced they'd not even read the script. Someone who didn't know what they were doing destroyed a year's worth of work. You want to work in comedy? Get used to getting hit with a pie in the face and sometimes under all that whipped cream, don't be surprised if there's a brick.

Behind the life and soul

Now, if I've not done so already, allow me to ruin comedy for you. You know how effortlessly funny your favourite comedian is? Well, they aren't. I've been lucky enough to be around some of the most truly brilliant comedians working today. People who can and do fill arenas. How they ended up doing that is by working their arses off. Don't get me wrong, there is a high level of natural

COMEDY GOLD:

C.K. Donnell's tips for writing comedy prose

1. This is for me the big one – comedy is not a genre. It is a style of storytelling. What do I mean by that? You need to, first and foremost, tell a story and it being funny comes down to how you tell it. Where you can go wrong is trying to be funny for the sake of it. If you ever find yourself putting a character into a room for the sole reason that you've thought of a joke that can happen when they're in there – get them out of there fast. Then barricade the door, push them out the nearest window and set the whole house on fire. You're telling a story; you're not telling a series of jokes. Narrative integrity matters.

2. Comedy can be camouflage. All genres of story but particularly crime or thriller, are based on what information you tell the reader and when you do so. We've all spotted the obvious signpost in a book that puts a big metaphorically flashing neon sign over a character's head saying KILLER or, worse still, had someone appear out of nowhere at the end and being announced as the convenient culprit. Great writers show us the villain and then bamboozle us, so we're somehow still surprised by the truth. The good news is comedy is an excellent way of telling someone something without telling them. If you get it right, one of those cream pies might look like it existed purely for the sake of the punchline, but you can secrete within it the brick that will hit the reader smack in the mush during the finale.

3. Things in threes are funnier. They just are.

4. No violence is funnier than a well-placed boot in the gonads. Limit yourself to one per book at most. They are a seasoning, not a core ingredient.

5. Comedy comes from character. We've all heard that phrase but what does it actually mean? For me, it means that a line is funny primarily because of who is saying it. If you take a piece of dialogue and you can give it to any of your characters, then something is wrong. You need to make sure they each have a distinct voice and that point where their individual world views collide, is where the comedy happens.

6. Learn when not to be funny. If you're telling the story right, the reader should care about the characters. If they're in danger, don't worry about being funny. Again, tell the story, don't try and crack the joke.

7. Endings are hard – but a great one is always worthwhile. Remember that guy who threw up on me? Well, I took that freely given sample of his DNA and it turns out it was him who killed the captain. Alright, it wasn't but if it had been, that would have been a great way to prove tip number two.

talent required, but I can give you a list of people you've never heard of who had it that you've never seen on TV. One of them might be sitting beside you on the bus while you read this, assuming they're not driving it. The effort put in to being effortless is immense. Comics will work and rework material and polish it up until that seemingly off-hand remark that looks like it has just occurred to them, slays night after night, time after time. Some people find the above disheartening. Personally, I find it reassuring. Turns out you can outwork the competition.

> "What is nice about being an author is that all the things I've done in my career up until this point, many of which seemed like an enormous waste of time soon after, now feel like they were useful."

Ups and downs

So, in 2015 I wrote a book because I think in hindsight, although I hadn't realised it at the time, I was possibly a little punch-drunk as a TV writer. I needed to do something different. I'd been meaning to write a short story and then the bloody thing got completely out of control. That book got picked up after a record-setting auction and I finally was able to buy that gold-plated Ferrari I'd always wanted. Only kidding. I went and asked and got told in no uncertain terms by the publishing world that comedy and crime was a terrible combination and that my book, *A Man with One of Those Faces* was 'too funny and too Irish'. My wife and I still liked it, even after all the feedback which we'd had to wash out of our metaphorical hair. Absent any other option, we self-published it and six months later – gold Ferrari! Nope, again. Six months later – I published another book, because a few people had liked the first one and, more importantly, I'd enjoyed writing it. Then a few more people liked the second and suddenly, there was a bit of momentum. Those books became known as *The Dublin Trilogy*, which at the time of writing contains an irritatingly, non-triumvirate seven novels and further spin-offs. They're still self-published by a company my wife now runs full-time, and we've sold about 800,000 books the last time we worked out the running total. The books are optioned for TV and as part of the deal, I don't want to try and write the pilot. Me from a decade ago would find that hard to believe.

And remember I said about how nothing feels wasted? Well, a sitcom script about a newspaper that reports the weird news from around the world that my then agent didn't even bother sending out to TV companies became *The Stranger Times*. It's the series I now write as C.K. McDonnell and it's published by the fine people at Transworld, the same company that published my all-time hero, Terry Pratchett.

If my long and winding career path has taught me anything, other than what motorway services at least have a chance of still having an over-priced sandwich available at 3am, it's that being willing to work matters. You can always get better. There will always be the unicorns who get 'discovered' at their second gig or get a seven-figure book deal after knocking out a jaunty tale on their summer holidays, but you don't need to worry about them. You can keep trying, keep working, keep attempting different things. You don't need everything to work – just one thing. They say comedy is timing and it is, but it's also time in. As in, if you put it in, you might just get something out of it. Most importantly though, and forgive me a moment the Disney ending, you get to do something that you really love doing along the way. You have to love it, as nobody would go through all that if they didn't because it really does get in your hair.

LOVE
WILL
TEAR US
APART
C. K. McDONNELL

***Love Will Tear Us Apart* by C.K. McDonnell, (The Stranger Times Book 3) will be published on 9 Feb by Bantam Press**

From the
OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK

CLAUSE FOR CONCERN

Discounted author copies? Surely that can't be a bad thing? **Piers Blofeld** urges authors to look carefully at their publishers' Ts & Cs

One of the least-noticed and seemingly most unremarkable corners of a publishing contract is the author's copies clause, in which the right of the author to buy their own books direct from the publisher at a set discount is set forth.

For most first time authors, especially debut novelists it seems like little more than a friendly little provision, just one of the tiny, exciting little details that will make their first book deal seem so deliciously real.

And indeed for most authors it is not a clause which will ever have much meaning in their lives and yet, in its own way it is a perfect exemplar of the way in which publishers reveal not only their essentially inequitable attitude to authors, but also the way in which that attitude is all too often ill thought through and bad business practice.

So, just to be clear the clause spells out that authors can buy copies of their books direct from the publisher at, generally, a 50% discount. Seems straightforward enough doesn't it? If only…

First of all, any publisher that offers less than 50% is to be regarded with great suspicion – it's a good sign that other elements of the contract will be dodgy too. But even 50%, which seems so fair, really isn't – the majority of the books that your publisher sells to bookshops will be at something far closer to a 60% discount and in many case well beyond that – and those sales will all be on consignment, i.e. sale or return, so the real cost to the publisher, once returns have been factored in, is greatly higher.

Of course in most authors' cases they are never going to be ordering more than a dozen or two copies to maybe give to friends. The disparity is neither here nor there and not worth making a fuss about. Nor do I. However, there are some authors, tremendous, active, diligent souls, who are perhaps plugged into some sort of speaking circuit and who are capable of selling quite a few hundreds of copies a year. And if we are, as I was a couple of years ago, dealing with a large national restaurant chain, those self-purchases can run into the tens of thousands.

In other words this can be a significant source of sales for publishers. Furthermore, it is also of course exactly the sort of thing they say they want from authors – platform, the dreaded 'P' word. So why do they seem to want to penalise authors who are good at it?

Because it doesn't stop at the discounts offered (which, to be fair can be negotiated upwards a little). Many of the author copies clauses will say that copies bought by authors may not be resold. This is a classic instance of publishers not really having a clue what they are asking, just reflexively holding onto rights in a pointlessly dog-in-the-manger way. As I said above, I know many authors who tirelessly crisscross the country doing dozens of talks a year, at the end of which they will chat to the audience and sell a few books – sometimes quite a few books. These are not sales which are in any way competing with the local Waterstones which quite possibly doesn't even have the book in stock. They are sales which would not ever have taken place unless the author had had the energy to give the talk in the first place. Publishers should be bending over backwards to facilitate this kind of thing.

But they don't, because it doesn't even stop there. In addition to offering inferior discounts and pointless restraints of trade (both of which a diligent agent can mitigate or remove) they further stipulate (in a separate part of the contract, so it is often overlooked) that no royalties are to be paid on sales of copies to authors and this is something on which they are deeply reluctant to yield.

It would be wrong, they piously say, for authors to collect royalties on books they have themselves bought, as if it is a form of double dipping. But the logic of this fails. A sale is a sale. Why would they want to do anything to get in the way of that? As I have said, there is a significant minority of authors who are capable of selling quite significant numbers this way and even if they were offering a 60% discount and paying royalties on those sales, because they are firm sales the profitability to the publisher is very significantly greater than any book they ever sell to a bookshop so publishers should be bending over backwards to encourage it.

But they don't. Old habits die hard.

A matter of speculation

This month, Cornerstones' Assistant Editor, **Sarah Conkerton**, discusses the often confusing 'speculative fiction', what agents and publishers mean when they use the term, and how and where it differs from traditional SFF

First things first – what is speculative fiction?

The term 'speculative fiction' can be a confusing one, and it can be difficult to define. Broadly, speculative fiction can refer to all forms of genre fiction – science fiction, fantasy, horror etc – but it often refers to a subgenre where these meet and merge with literary or general fiction. Essentially, speculative fiction can refer to any novel that deals with elements beyond reality.

Some common markers of modern speculative fiction are a near-future setting, a central theme that feels especially pertinent to our own time, or a setting identical to contemporary times save for one crucial worldbuilding detail (such as a scientific procedure or discovery). Perhaps the most well-known modern novel in this category is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in essence a dystopia but appealing to a more general audience. Cyberpunk thrillers like *Altered Carbon* could also come under this umbrella.

While the genre hinges upon its dealings with unreality or the fantastical, its closest twin in terms of marketing and categorisation is really literary fiction. Many readers (and publishing professionals) who would be happy to pick up a book club read but would avoid, for example, hardboiled sci-fi are part of the audience for speculative fiction, and it's this kind of reader you might wish to have in mind as you consider targeting and pitching your novel.

When should I call my novel 'speculative?

Though all genre fiction is technically a type of speculative fiction, agents will have something specific in mind when they read the term, and there's perhaps less overlap than you might expect between agents that handle speculative fiction and agents that handle other types of genre fiction. Generally, you should only use the term if your novel fits that middle ground between SFF and literary fiction, hitting some or all of the notes outlined above. If your manuscript is a fantasy novel set in a fictional world full of magic and monsters, for example, don't use the term 'speculative fiction' when submitting – just call it fantasy. The level of worldbuilding can be a crucial factor in separating speculative from genre fiction, with the former requiring less from the reader in one sense. Speculative fiction should be accessible to readers unfamiliar with science fiction and fantasy, and worldbuilding elements will often contribute to a bigger thematic picture rather than being purely atmospheric.

If you aren't quite sure where your novel falls and what to term it, it's best to get a second opinion from a trusted reader. Having the correct genre in mind when submitting is vital, both for getting your pitch right and approaching the right agents.

Submitting your work of speculative fiction

Speculative fiction can be particularly tricky to pitch, but if you've nailed your query and identified a hook, there are plenty of agents with a strong interest in this kind of novel. When looking for agents, it's particularly important to know what kind of reader your manuscript will appeal to – is it sci-fi with a literary voice? Coming of age fiction with a magical realism twist? Whatever shape your manuscript takes, it's vital to think about where it would sit on bookshop shelves, and look for agents that champion that type of work. If your speculative fiction manuscript is set in a distant future, for example, and full of worldbuilding details reminiscent of more traditional sci-fi, you may not want to focus on agents who represent literary and speculative fiction but avoid SFF. If your novel is a near-future thriller, focussed on action and suspense, look for agents who represent these fast-paced and high-stakes novels generally.

In summary, speculative fiction can be a confusing and nebulous term, but it's worth approaching from all angles – especially if you think you might be writing it.

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- Vanessa Moore, *One Thousand Days and One Cup of Tea*, Octopus Books (2021)

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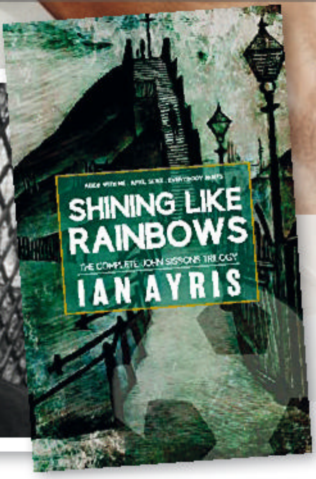

SHINING LIKE RAINBOWS
THE COMPLETE JOHN SISSONS TRILOGY
IAN AYRIS

In part two of his series on character and voice, author and creative writing tutor **Ian Ayris** provides you with the tools to create characters readers will connect with

In the last issue, we looked at character types, stereotypes, character names, if you can have too many characters, and where characters come from.

We are now going to look at how to bring your characters to life on the page.

Oh, and we'll also be taking a look at where characters *really* come from...

A character's importance to the story

First of all, it is important to understand the context within which the reader will experience the characters you create. This context is, of course, the story within which you place them.

Two questions are instructive to answer:

i) What is the story about?

ii) What is the story *really* about?

Let's take, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*. The answer to the first question could be answered as 'a party of adventurers setting out to destroy The One Ring to save Middle Earth'. To discover the answer to the second question – what is the story *really* about – we need to look at the whole thing through a broader lens.

So, what *is* the story really about?

Yes, the story is about destroying the One Ring, but beyond this, it is about friendship and courage, it is about good and evil, faith, hope and self-doubt.

Hold that thought there for a moment...

Let's look at all this on a character level.

On a character level, we have Frodo – a young hobbit – whose task in the novel is to take the One Ring to Mount Doom – a volcano deep inside enemy territory with a view to dropping it into the molten lava within. This is Frodo's role in the story. This is what he does.

But it tells us nothing about who Frodo is. Put Frodo in the context of what the story is really about, and his place in the story is elevated to one beyond trying his best to chuck a ring into a volcano. He becomes the focal point of themes universal.

It could be argued Frodo is not the greatest example to demonstrate the depth of a character, but he is the character around which all else moves. He embodies hope and courage and fear and faith, and huge self-doubt. For much of the book, the struggle of good and evil literally plays out inside him.

We have all felt the need for friendship and courage, and we have all experienced hope, or the need for it. Good and evil are almost ingrained in our DNA. Faith, well, we could all do with a little of that these days.

It is the universal themes of what a story is really about, embodied by the central characters of the story, with which the reader really connects.

And, as in life, connection is everything.

Having used Frodo as an example, it's time to take a closer look at a character's role within a story.

The function of character

Every character, including secondary characters, must have a reason for being present in your story. They might have a minor role, perhaps not even a speaking part, but they must be there for a reason. To say each and every character must have a definable goal might be going a little far. But when we look at the major characters in a story, the ones that drive the plot, a definable goal is exactly what they need to have. So what is it? What is the goal for each of your main characters? And, most importantly, what are the consequences if they fail? The consequences of failure create the motivation for the character to succeed. Get a handle on a character's motivation and you will be able to see through their eyes, feel the beat of their heart, walk in their shoes.

In the editing phase it is important to track a character's journey throughout the story. The journey is called a character's 'arc'. The idea of tracking a character's arc is to ensure everything flows the way you intend it. One way of tracking characters is to construct a spreadsheet, as follows. This is an example from my last novel:

One of the advantages of this sort of organisation is you can see the position of each character in the story relative to the other characters. You can see if a character has dropped out for too long, or if a secondary character is dominating, etc. This chart also allows you to 'see' the progression of the story through scenes, giving you an idea of the story as a whole (the context) as well as individual timelines for each character.

John is the central character – and narrator – of the novel. This being so, I felt it important to track his mood so I could manipulate the peaks and troughs of his lived experience in the novel and match them with his actions. I wanted to create a wavelike effect of ups and downs that the reader could experience along with John.

Describing characters

Writing fiction is all about maintaining the *illusion* of reality, of creating characters as real as any person you know. In real life, we can tell most about a person by what they say and what they do. In fiction, this translates to 'action' and 'dialogue'.

Let's examine the first of these:

Revealing character through action.

Now, I don't believe in rules for writing, as such, but there are ways that help the writer create and maintain the illusion of reality, and there are ways that jolt the reader out of it. And you don't want to do that. Perhaps the most powerful way of bringing your characters – and indeed, your writing – to life, is the mantra:

SHOW NOT TELL

Show not tell is exactly what it says. You show the reader what is going on instead of merely *tell*ing them.

Let's apply this to the writing of a character with the following example:

The girl watched the door handle turn from the other side, and was frightened.

Chapter	John	Tracey	Keith	Thommo	Scene(s)	John's Mood
1	Grieving Mum	At work, thinking about John			John's House/ Tracey's work	2
2	Visiting Thommo		Visiting Thommo	Visited by John and Keith	Mental Health Unit	5
3	Breaking down				John's house	1

In this example, the writer is *telling* the reader the girl is frightened, but what does that look like? What is the picture in your head of the fear gripping this girl? That's right – nothing. You need to *show* this picture in order to engage the reader. You do not need to show every single minute detail of a character and what they do, but you need to show enough.

The way to focus in on what a character is doing is by asking one simple question of your description of the character – in a sense a question of the verb: What does it look like? In this case, the girl is 'frightened'. But what does 'frightened' look like? To get there, think of a movie camera zooming in on the character, and write what you see.

TELL:

The girl watched the handle turn from the other side and was ***frightened.***

SHOW:

The girl watched the door handle turn from the other side. ***She stepped back. Her breathing hard and ragged, eyes bulging from the skeletal frame of her pallid face. She bit down on her lower lip till it burst.***

And screamed.

The more you practise this kind of writing the more you will see the effect it has. Of course, as always, it's about balance. There may be times you want to just *tell* the reader what the character is doing. If the character is doing something important, bring that camera right in, *show* the reader. If the character is doing something that doesn't need to be seen up close – the part in a movie where the camera pans out to a wide shot – a car speeding across a desert, for example – use *tell.*

To *show* feelings, you have to work hard. *Show* the sadness, *show* the fear. *'He cried'* – not good enough. *Show* the tears. *Show* the colour of the face. *Show* the clenching of the fists and the biting of the lip. *Show* the heavy sigh. Every character will emote differently. Use these differences to reveal layers of their personality to the reader.

Conveying the thoughts of a character

is a little different. Thoughts are one of those things where *telling* a reader what a character is thinking can often be the only option.

Revealing character through dialogue

There is no better way to reveal character than through dialogue. Always approach writing dialogue as a *scene of dialogue*. In real life, people do not just talk. All good writing is good re-writing, and all good dialogue is about responses to dialogue. In a *scene of dialogue*, characters feel, they think, they move, they act and react. All these responses are indicative of character – perhaps even more so – than words alone.

Use dialogue as a response, yes, but always think about thought, feeling, movement and action as reactions to words. There is nothing more powerful than a silent response or the striding out of the room and slamming of a door, a white-knuckled clenched fist, the hard stare and biting of the lip to stop the flow of tears. *Know* your characters and you will *know* their responses in any given conversation.

Your characters' responses in a scene of dialogue are situational. My responses and choice of words and body language are different, for example, when I am working with children in a school than when I am at a football match venting my frustrations regarding the inadequacy of the referee or play-acting of the opposing team.

As your characters journey through your story, events – hopefully – will change them. A character may find a voice, find the words in a situation that earlier in the story might have left them mute and looking at the floor. They may gain wisdom. They may gain humility or courage or lose these things and break down entirely. You must reflect these changes in their responses in a scene of dialogue.

Your characters are *real*. Give them *real* responses, show these responses to the reader, and your characters will burst into life.

Using the vernacular

If you wish to convey the accent, dialect, language or speech pattern of a character, do not let it slip too far into phonetic speech or you risk the reader simply skipping those sections (see the character of Joseph in *Wuthering Heights* as an example of this). Instead, give a flavour of the speech through word order and the odd sprinkling of dialect or slang. Balance, as always, is key. Want to learn more about vernacular? See *Trainspotting, The Colour Purple* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Great books, one and all.

Where do characters really come from?

In truth, your characters have been living within you far longer than you have imagined, waiting for you to lead them out into the cold light of the blank page. Your characters reside within you because they *are* you. *Their* conflicts are *your* conflicts, *their* fears *yours*. Strip your stories to the bone, and you will see their *life* is yours. Read the biographies of famous writers and you will find this to be undoubtedly true.

Stuck for how your character should respond, act, think, feel, be? How would you respond, act, think, feel, *be*?

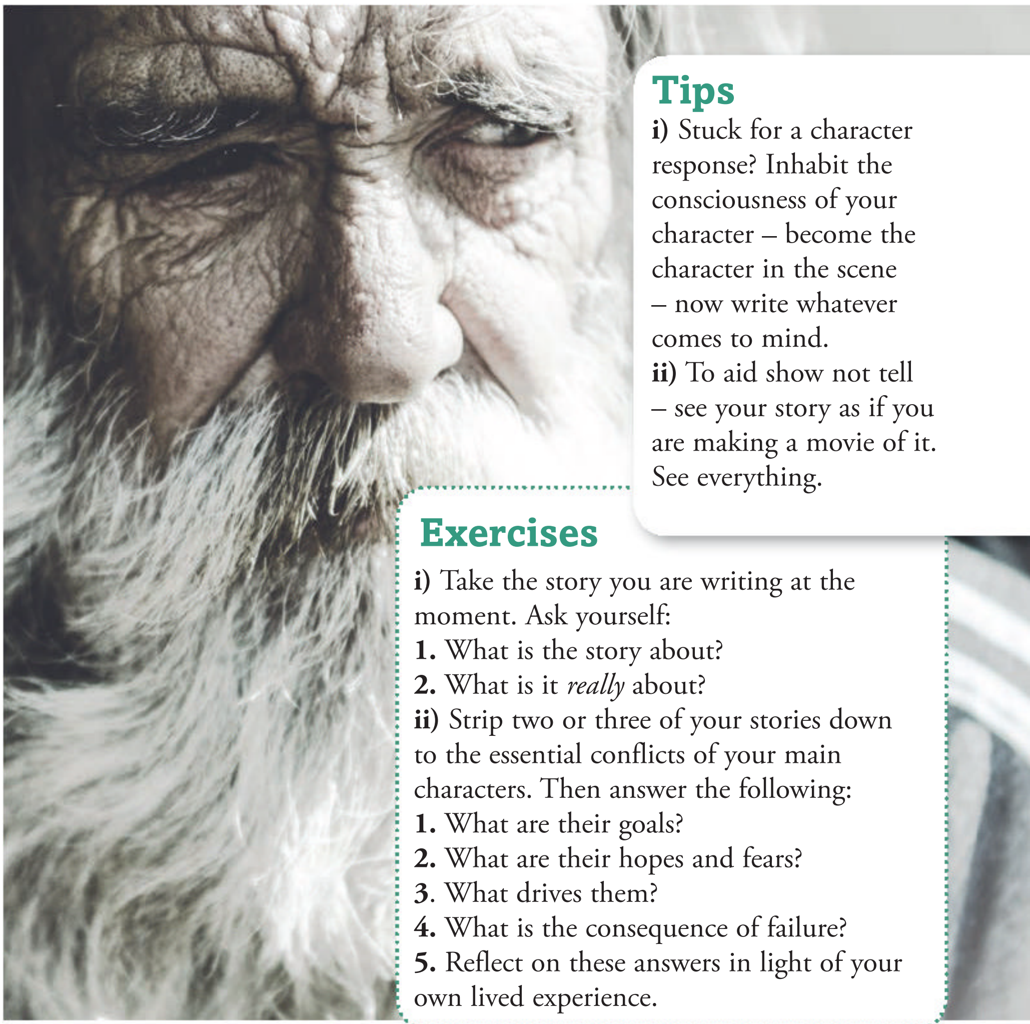
Think hard… that's it…

Now write that.

Conclusion

Bring your characters to life with *Show not Tell*. Work hard at it. Work *really* hard. *Know* the part your characters play in the story, know what your story is about, know what your story is *really* about. If you don't know any of these, what chance has your reader got?

In the next issue, we will be looking at how to portray your characters in the most effective way through Point of View, and that elusive, wondrous thing all publishers are looking for – your writing Voice.



Tips

i) Stuck for a character response? Inhabit the consciousness of your character – become the character in the scene – now write whatever comes to mind.

ii) To aid show not tell – see your story as if you are making a movie of it. See everything.

Exercises

i) Take the story you are writing at the moment. Ask yourself:

1. What is the story about?

2. What is it *really* about?

ii) Strip two or three of your stories down to the essential conflicts of your main characters. Then answer the following:

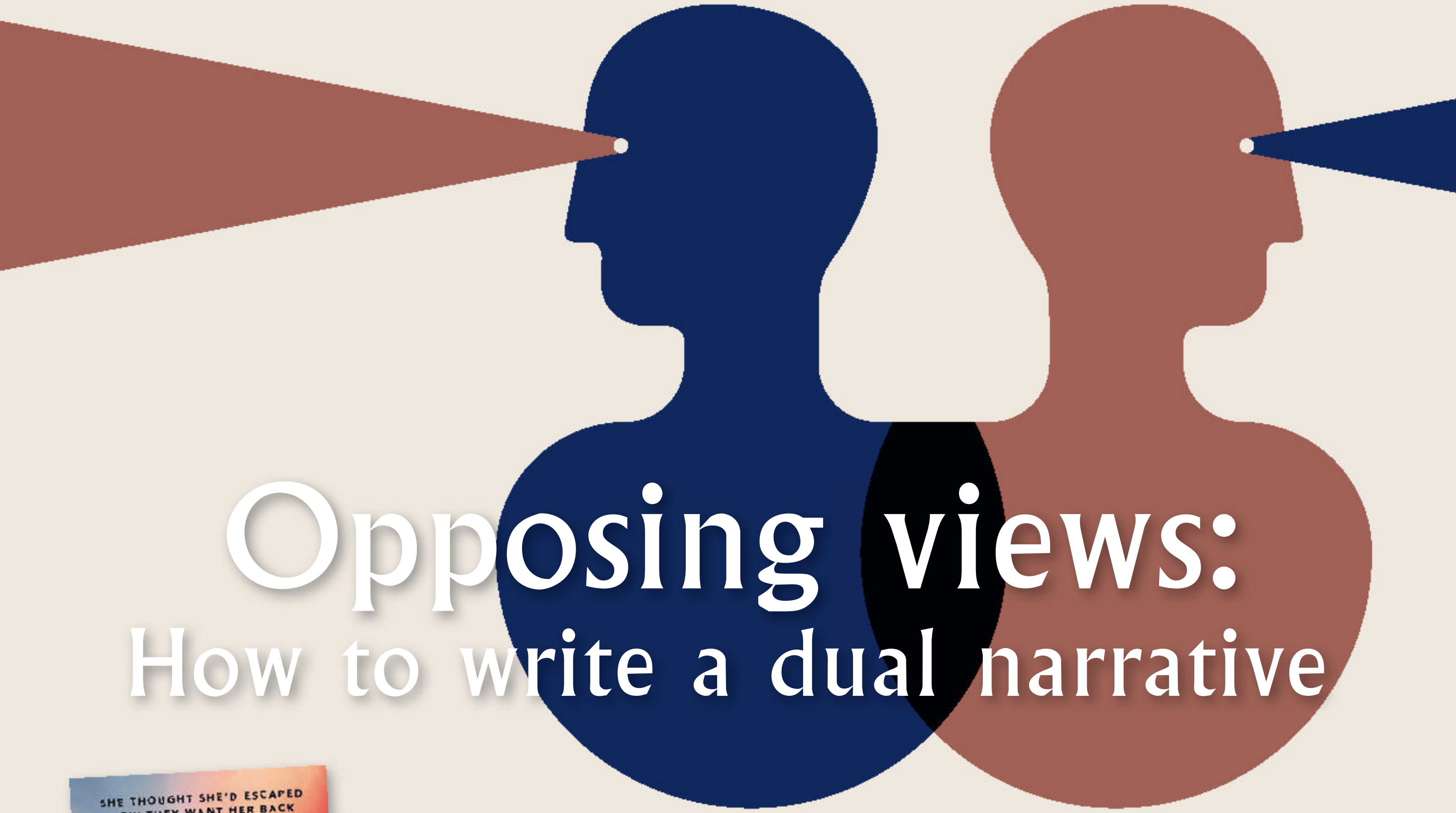
1. What are their goals?

2. What are their hopes and fears?

3. What drives them?

4. What is the consequence of failure?

5. Reflect on these answers in light of your own lived experience.



Opposing views:

How to write a dual narrative

SHE THOUGHT SHE'D ESCAPED
NOW THEY WANT HER BACK
HOME
CAILEAN STEED

Using a dual narrative opens up interesting possibilities for your fiction. Novelist **Cailean Steed** explains how it works, highlights outstanding examples for you to learn from, and offers exercises to get you creating your own dual narratives.

From Charles Dickens to Anthony Doerr, writers have explored the possibilities of telling a story from dual perspectives. It allows you to focus on the contrasting experiences of two characters, or can even bring your reader into the mind of a character at different points in their life. But how do you juggle the competing focuses of a dual narrative?

The first thing to consider is whether your story would benefit from a dual narrative. Do you have two key characters that you want to contrast with each other? Do you want to create a fast pace and ratchet up tension? Do you want to create an unreliable narrator?

At its heart, the purpose of a dual narrative is to set two things against each other, and highlight each by doing so. If one of your narratives shines much more brightly than the other, then you may find your readers skipping chapters.

Ideally, what you want is for both elements of the narrative to have their own charm and draw your readers in for different reasons. Perhaps one narrative answers questions posed in the other. Maybe two very different characters are set on a collision course, and the reader is desperate to see how they will come together. You might even use the structure to explore one character at two different ages, as I did in my debut novel *Home*.

Home follows Zoe at two points in her life: as a child trapped in a secretive cult, and as an adult struggling to come to terms with her past. Although the adult chapters reveal that Zoe was able to escape, tension is built in

DAZZLING
Chikodili Emelumadu

Exercise

Come up with two characters whose stories are told in distinctively different ways: you might consider using different tenses, first or third person (or even second!), varying accents or language styles, or contrasting sentence structure (does one character narrate in flowing, lyrical sentences, while the other voice is clipped and staccato, for example?)

the childhood chapters as we move towards exactly how that escape was achieved, and what it cost her. Likewise, the adult chapters follow Zoe returning to the cult in an attempt to rescue her sister, providing tension not only as she navigates the cult with fresh eyes, but also as her recollection of events is challenged. Alternating the narratives creates pace and the ability to explore parallel events.

Perhaps the most common approach to a dual narrative is interleaving chapters. Chikodili Emelumadu, in her upcoming fabulist novel *Dazzling*, uses this approach to stunning effect by ensuring the narrative voice of each strand is strikingly different to the other. The chapters following Ozoemena, a young girl struggling with her family's legacy, are told in close third, while the story of Treasure, a young girl who makes a terrible bargain, is told in first person. Moreover, Ozoemena's narration is written in standard English, whereas Treasure's utilises Igbo and Igbo transliteration into English: *Mummy used to say I have bad heart because if you do me bad, I do you back, God no go vex.* As a result, the two chapters feel very different, not only because of the contrasting experiences and personalities of the girls, but also because their voices are so distinctive.

Emelumadu's interleaving of the two narratives is also incredibly effective in building towards an explosive climax, as the girls' worlds ultimately collide. This approach also works well in thriller or crime novels. Hannah King's *She And I*, a gripping crime thriller, uses multiple narrative strands to gradually build towards the final revelation of what really happened the night of a party where a guest was stabbed to death. Orientating the reader with chapter headings noting names and times, King contrasts the police investigation with events before and after the crime took place. Each narrative strand adds another layer of complexity to the story, showing the differing ways that various characters have remembered events.

HANNAH KING
'Gripping and full of soul' Sarah Pearse
Best friends do everything together. Is murder any different?
'King really understands suspense' Holly Watt
SHE AND I

Exercise

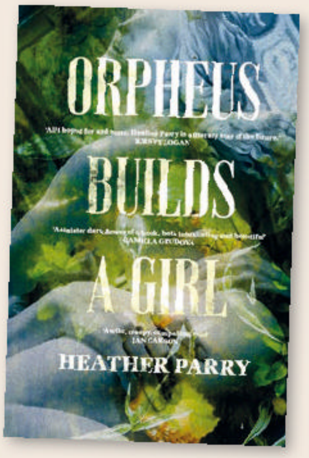
Imagine an event told from various points of view. Perhaps one or more characters have something to hide. Maybe one character's perspective was impaired or affected in some way. One character might be trying to find out the truth, while others attempt to aid or obstruct them. Don't reveal everyone's motives right away – consider what clues can be laid while others are held back.

Heather Parry's novel *Orpheus Builds a Girl* also makes use of dual narrative to explore reliability. In Parry's novel, the perspective of German doctor Wilhelm is set against that of Gabriela, a Cuban woman whose sister Luci becomes the object of Wilhelm's obsession. Wilhelm's self-aggrandising account of his life leaves clear gaps for the reader to fill: *Though I was endlessly frustrated at having to sit through classes I could well have taught – and several of which I had learned were untrue – I conducted myself with absolute obedience and simply buried myself in my studies while the other boys were catching up.* However, Parry also subtly interrogates the notion of absolute truth with the character of Gabriela: *I am again here, trying to rescue my sister, the truth of my sister, one final time.* Both characters are unreliable in their own way – Wilhelm, through his evasions and self-interest, but also Gabriela, in her desire to protect her sister.

Exercise

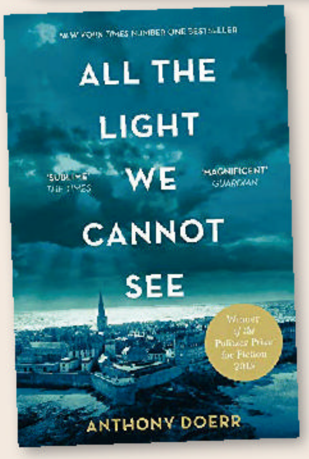
Create a character who does not know that they are unreliable. Consider how you will communicate the flaws in their perspective to the reader, while writing from the character's point of view. Does their version of things contrast with established events? Does it seem wildly unlikely? Do they overhear other characters, but not fully understand what is being said or done?

Parry's characters are brought together several times during the story, but some dual narratives take a different approach, where characters live parallel lives and only interact briefly, such as Anthony Doerr's world war two epic, *All the Light You Cannot See*. Werner is a German orphan, whose facility with radios both ensures his safety in the Nazi regime while also gradually



Exercise

Create two characters whose lives are parallel, but who only meet briefly. Consider what aspects of their personalities, lives, and beliefs could connect them. How do their stories bring them together, and for what purpose? What effect does their meeting have on each of them?

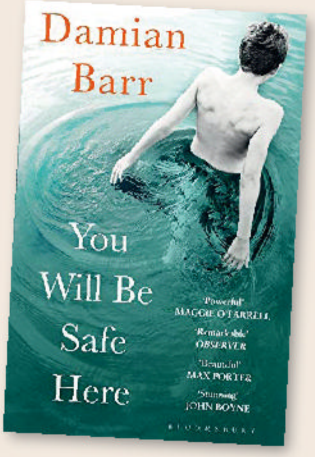

NEW YORK TIMES NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER
ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE
'SUBLIME' THE TIMES
'MAGNIFICENT' GUARDIAN
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2015
ANTHONY DOERR

making him complicit in its horrors. Marie-Laure is a French girl who became blind at a young age, and who struggles to survive amid occupation. The contrasting narratives allow Doerr to explore competing aspects of the war – soldier and civilian, French and German, man and woman, occupier and occupied. However, the characters are joined by connections that they do not even know exist until it is almost too late, such as a series of radio broadcasts made by Marie-Laure's grandfather, which Werner loved as a child.

The gradual way that the narrative moves the two characters closer exquisitely builds tension, but the dual narrative also allows Doerr to explore the thematic resonances in his work – how interconnected our lives are, how individuals survive in war, and blindness, both literal and metaphorical. Another writer who uses theme to link his characters is Damian Barr, in his novel *You Will be Safe Here*. Barr takes a unique approach to the dual narrative structure: rather than interleaving chapters, he writes the book in two separate parts. Part 1 follows Sarah, who in 1901 who is forced to Bloemfontein Concentration Camp along with her young son. Part 2 is set over one hundred years later, and follows Willem, a young South African who is sent by his parents to a strict training camp. Though the characters never meet, and are unaware of each other, they are connected thematically, with Barr's exploration of colonial history, survival, and humanity's capacity for both extreme cruelty and stunning kindness. The narratives inform and illuminate each other, and resonances build to create a rich and moving tale.

Exercise

Consider a setting that two characters share at different points in time. Why is this setting significant to them, and their stories? How does the past setting impact on the present? How does the present setting enable us to understand the past, or shed a new light on it? What connects these two characters throughout history?



Overall, dual narratives offer many exciting possibilities for both writer and reader. They are incredibly effective in building pace and tension, and also enable you to create complex characters and explore meaningful themes. When writing your own dual narrative, remember above all to have fun with it! It opens up so many ways for you to vary your writing style, create a breakneck pace, or play with your readers' expectations and assumptions. Reading some of the books suggested above will help, but there are many others to choose from as well, including Sunyi Dean's *The Book Eaters*, *Sundial* by Catriona Ward, and N. K. Jemison's *The Fifth Season*.

***Home* by Cailean Steed is published by Raven Books**

Top tips for writing a dual narrative

- **Switch your narratives at a moment of tension.** If you end each chapter on a dramatic moment, it will keep the reader keen to return to it.

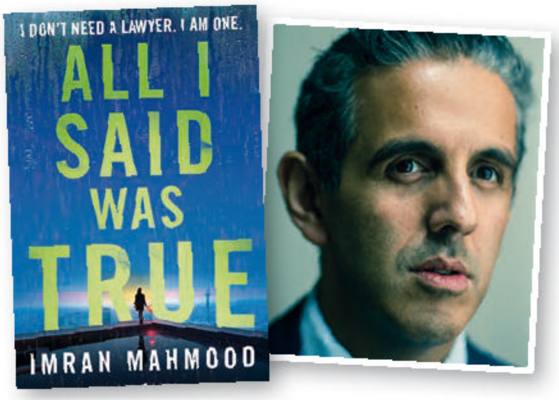
- **Begin each new chapter at a moment that reflects in some way the ending of the previous one.** For example, ending a chapter with a character being angry, and beginning the next with someone telling another character to calm down provides a clear link between narratives and enables the stories to flow.

- **Don't recap events.** Your reader will get bored if the something they've already seen happen is rehashed again. However, you can add to events that have already happened, by providing additional context or details that were not present in the initial scene. This keeps the reader intrigued and can be used to build mystery.

- **Orientate your reader.** Dual narratives have the potential to become confusing, so it is essential that your reader knows which character they are following in each chapter. Chapter headings can help with this, by noting names, dates, places or times. However, your different narratives should also feel different to each other – either by content and/or narrative voice. If they are too samey, it may be worth asking yourself why you're using a dual narrative at all.

Imran Mahmood

The barrister and acclaimed novelist tells **Lynne Hackles** how he makes the most of waiting time and interruptions to write his compelling crime thrillers


I DON'T NEED A LAWYER. I AM ONE.
ALL I SAID WAS TRUE
IMRAN MAHMOOD

Originally from Liverpool, Imran Mahmood now lives in London with his wife and daughters. Imran is a practising barrister with thirty years' experience fighting cases in courtrooms. I asked how he found time to fit writing into his busy life.

'As a barrister, I spend a lot of time travelling and whenever I get on a train I put on my headphones and write,' he explains. 'There's also a lot of waiting time in court – waiting for juries or for a free court so I take advantage of that time too.

'A thousand words is the aim each day but if I even get a hundred it's fine. Writing every day creates a routine for me so that the thoughts I have at night can find a place in the day. I try and keep flexible so, if I don't get time in the day, I can wait till everyone in the house is asleep and write then. I take whatever time I can get. I've two young children so large parts of the day are often written off with feeding and managing them. But it makes me especially tuned into using any free time there is.

'My job is full of interruptions (urgent calls or urgent work needed on a brief) so I've never had a problem with switching tasks and then switching straight back to what I was doing before. Treat an interruption as a mental break, I say. And procrastination is something I only face when it comes to jobs I don't like doing. The fact is I enjoy writing so much and have so little time to do it that I don't have procrastination to worry about. A bit of window-gazing is no bad thing in my book, and when I get into a day dream – I find that a helpful process. Sometimes a little boredom is exactly what I need to fire the imagination.

'I don't really use Facebook and I don't blog but I do use Twitter as both a publicity tool and a way of keeping up with the news. It's a great place to connect with other writers and follow all the events my friends have been at – especially if I've missed them myself. I do a ton of talks, signings, panels, radio, podcasts, festivals, libraries – literally everything. They're always good fun and meeting new readers is always a joy.

'I was about eleven when I realised I loved to write. An English teacher of mine once read out a story I'd written to the class. It sounded much better in her telling than in my head. I remember her being really pleased with it and full of (probably undeserved) praise. That stayed with me and continues to drive me at some level.

'I've just delivered my fourth book which is coming out next year. My latest release, book three, came out last July and is called, *All I Said Was True*. It starts with a police caution. Layla is arrested with a dead woman in her arms. She is being interviewed by the police and is firmly telling them she didn't kill her. Layla is herself a lawyer and knows that the police have a certain amount of time to charge or release her. In one sense this is a ticking-clock thriller. On a different level the book is about free will. A mysterious man, Michael, appeared in her life one day and told her she has no free will – that free will is a myth. This book explores that too. Without freedom to choose can we ever be accountable for anything we do?

'It sounds silly but once I have a character in my head, I just start speaking in his voice. I write the first thing that comes into my head. Sometimes that opening line is changed in the edit but the process helps me find a way into the story. It's a little like jumping into a cold pool. Sometimes you just have to jump.

'I don't do much planning or research in advance. I research as I go along. One reason is that I don't always know what I'm going to need to find out until I'm there. And I'm not a great cataloguer of data so I'm sure I would lose the information almost immediately.

'Currently, I'm writing a court room drama. It's a slight departure for me but I've always loved the Grisham, Landy and Turow books and wanted to write a kind of tribute to that body of work.'

WRITING PLACE

'I was lucky enough in lockdown to have just had a study built in the loft. There was no desk but fancying myself as a DIYer I did some research and realised I wanted something beautiful and modern. I found a place that supplied lovely long lengths of black American walnut, raw and unfinished, and spent time carefully oiling and then waxing it until it became a shining whisky amber. I added legs and positioned it by the window to give me a great view of the sky – perfect if you're in the mood to aim for the stars.'

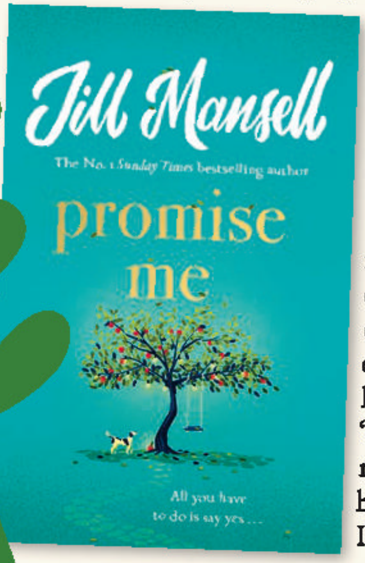
Dreams can come true

Jill Mansell, the Queen of Feelgood Fiction, talks to **Tina Jackson** about how she creates the warm, relatable romantic comedies that have sold more than 14 million copies worldwide

It's all been so unremittingly grim recently that a deep delve into escapist feelgood fiction is a welcome retreat from the everyday world. And it doesn't get more uplifting than the romantic comedies of Jill Mansell, the bestselling author known as the Queen of Feelgood Fiction. Jill's latest, *Promise Me*, sweeps the reader into a believable, relatable world where dreams can – in the end, and after a lot of ups and downs – come gloriously true.

In person, Jill is as delightful as her books – friendly, approachable, involving, and making light of all the hard work that goes into maintaining a long career as a successful commercial author – *Promise Me* is her 34th book.

'Uplit's popular because we've been going through a really, really horrible time in the last few years!' she says. 'One of my books was on a list the doctors were told to recommend when people were depressed. Feelgood fiction is just something to take you away from what could be a really miserable existence. Cheering people up – there's nothing wrong with that! It's nice to forget your own troubles and just cheer people up.'


Jill Mansell
The No. 1 Sunday Times bestselling author
promise me
All you have to do is say yes....

Romcoms may be dismissed in snooty quarters as light, fluffy reading. But they can have a lasting impact on the lives of readers who see their own troubles reflected in stories which offer the possibility of change and a happy ending. 'I've had some lovely messages,' says Jill. 'Saying your book inspired me to leave my terrible husband, abusive marriage, I've met someone lovely and it's all thanks to you.'

Jill thinks feelgood romance is so popular because it's relatable, not utterly beyond the boundaries of possibility. 'I think we just look for escapism – but not wildly escapist,' she says. 'Larger than life but not completely from another world. All these things can and do happen to everybody, just not usually in a small village in a couple of months. It's happy-making.'

It goes without saying that, before there can be a feel-good ending, there has to be a feel-bad beginning. A natural wellspring of humour bubbles to the surface even when Jill's talking about the set-up for *Promise Me*, which sees heroine Lou at a low point in her life following the death of her abusive husband Brett. 'It was, how did he die covered in trifle? I don't know how the hell that happened but it was all of the starting point in the book,' says Jill. 'I've done widowed people before and they loved their partners, and it was would they be that quick to move on? It was important to have that in the book.'

The set-ups don't always have to be awful but they should spark the need for something better. 'Not necessarily really grim – but if they're super happy in the first place it's less of a character arc isn't it?' says Jill.

In Lou's case, in *Promise Me*, her new life begins when she takes up the position of housekeeper to curmudgeonly Edgar, who lives in a grand house in a Cotswold village. 'So that's a different aspect. I do try and alternate, have different life experiences in the books. Familiar but different. How many basic plot lines are there?'

Character makes all the difference when it comes to

Jill Mansell
The Sunday Times No.1 Bestselling Author
it started with a secret
Jill Mansell
The No.1 Sunday Times bestselling author
should I tell you?

plotting, believes Jill.

'Writing-wise, unless you're emotionally invested, why would you carry on reading a book? And I get to write about really nice people – I surround myself with these fictional lovely people, who are far nicer than me! It's just making, and sparking, the chemistry between them, so you can feel they're really attracted to each other.'

A feelgood book depends on the reader investing in its characters and their situations. 'I just think the most important thing is you have to care about the characters,' says Jill. 'You have to love them – even the flawed ones. Well, we're all flawed. And the unlikable ones – they just think they're doing the right thing. Edgar is a right old misery guts and he doesn't really get his happy ending, does he?' (With this teaser from its author, *WM* readers will have to turn to *Promise Me* to find out what happens to Edgar – and to Lou).

Jill says her ideas often start with a place. 'I like to go around searching for a setting for my books,' she explains. 'I grew up in the Cotswolds and I like driving out on a nice sunny day and I was in Nailsworth in Gloucestershire and saw this big house on its own. And it sparked, I wonder who lived there?'

Jill's writing book number 35 now. 'And I sort of think, when I'm starting off with a new idea, it's what haven't I done before? I am so aware that readers will say, oh it's just the same kind of characters in there. And that does happen – because there are only so many kinds of characters I can write. So, for *Promise Me*, it was a grumpy old man – and why is he grumpy? So I like to have my setting, find out where people live and what they're doing there. I go through Yellow Pages looking for jobs.'

> "The most important thing is you have to care about the character. You have to love them – even the flawed ones. Well, we're all flawed. And the unlikable ones – they just think they're doing the right thing"

Although all the ends in the multi-stranded *Promise Me* tie up neatly, Jill is the kind of writer who prefers to see where an idea will take her.

'I don't really plan the books,' she says. 'I have no idea when I start. I was talking to [fellow feelgood romance writer] Cathy Bramley and said I so wish I was a proper plotter, and I just can't. It won't work. I have to have one or two brief ideas and see where it takes me. So many people say, it's so much easier once you know what's going to happen, and I write myself into corners. But I think if I plotted it, I'd get better ideas as I went along, so what's the point of starting out like that? You get to know the characters more. At the beginning it's like being invited to a party and you don't know anyone – they're all strangers.'

Even though Jill's books have sold more than 14million copies internationally since the publication of her debut, *Fast Friends*, in 1991, she still frets when each book is finished. 'I finish writing my books and I think they're dreadful and awful and that my editor will think maybe we should leave this and try again,' she says. 'I was so lucky with the first one and the second one just shot out, but it's got more and more difficult. It's a tricky balancing act, always trying to find new plot ideas.'

The romance has to keep being reinvented as well. 'For a modern hero and heroine – the world has changed, dating has changed. It was always a little bit laughable before when people put dating ads in the paper and now it's what everyone does, all the time. And everything changes and we romantic novelists have to keep up with it.'

Friends are a constant in Jill's books. 'I wonder if I prefer writing about the friendship?' she says. 'I do love reading about friends – who can just say things to each other. It's such an easy relationship, friendship. Friendship circles are massively important to us.'

Jill's blend of effervescent style and kindly interest in the emotional lives of her characters is similar to that of her own writing heroine, Jilly Cooper. Even before Jill thought of being a writer, Jilly Cooper was an influence.

'Jilly Cooper had a column in the *Sunday Times* – I discovered that before I discovered her books' she describes. 'My uncle used to save the columns for me and bring them when he drove down to see us and I've read everything she's ever written. When I very first started writing, I was

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Eco-fiction: FOLLOW THE SCIENCE

THE WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER
PETER MAY
A WINTER GRAVE

Leading crime writer **Peter May** describes how he was inspired by the science to create crime thrillers with a terrifying backdrop of climate crisis, and tells you how to find the story that will bring your climate change fiction to life.

As a crime/thriller writer, I have sometimes been accused of deviating from my genre by straying into what some might call science, or even eco fiction.

But I don't believe in the artificial boundaries placed on us as writers by the marketing concept of genre. Crime, it seems to me, is a broad enough church to encompass everything. And eco-fiction is a sub-genre that very easily sits beneath the umbrella of crime.

I have written three eco-themed books – *The Firemaker* (first of the China Thrillers series), *Coffin Road*, and my latest book, *A Winter Grave* – both standalones.

The Firemaker dealt with the subject of genetically modified, or Frankenstein foods. *Coffin Road* was about the disappearance of bees from the environment and the toxicity of pesticides being peddled by the agrochemical industry. *A Winter Grave* is set against a backdrop of climate change.

The writing of each of these books was prompted by personal interest. I don't believe you can simply pick an issue or theme and write about it because of its perceived commercial value. It has to be something that engages you deeply, at both an emotional and an intellectual level. How else do you give it heart, and convey your strength of feeling to the reader?

But usually there is a trigger of some sort. Something that ignites your interest, or passion, or anger.

In the case of *The Firemaker*, I had read various articles on the subject of GMOs. This was the mid-1990s, and the whole subject had been flying under the radar. Very few people actually knew how far the science had progressed, to the extent that they were already eating genetically modified foods without knowing it – and certainly in ignorance of their potential hazards.

My interest was piqued sufficiently to attend a conference on the subject at the annual Edinburgh Science Fair. The floor was taken by a gentleman called John Smith, an advisor to the then government on what were known as 'novel' foods. He was gratuitously rude to a young woman sitting next to me who asked a perfectly reasonable question about the moral and religious ethics of tampering with nature. I felt my hackles rise. He then proceeded to dismiss the notion of labelling foodstuffs to allow consumers a choice in the matter. 'What's the point?' he scoffed. 'Within ten years everything we eat will be genetically modified anyway.'

And that was the trigger. His arrogance in ignoring the dangers of an unproven science, and in refusing consumers their choice. I determined there and then to research the subject in depth, and to write about it in a novel.

My interest in bees came from my association with an emeritus professor of genetics who had helped me in my research for *The Firemaker*. He was passionate on the subject, and was the first scientist to address the European Parliament on the link between the dwindling bee population and a group of neuro-active insecticides known as neonicotinoids.

I was first attracted by the mystery. Why were bees vanishing in such great numbers? They were leaving their hives in their droves never to return. A phenomenon that became known as 'colony collapse'. Then came my understanding that without bees, much of the food we grow to eat would disappear, because bees were the pollinators without which many of our crops would not survive. The final piece of the jigsaw fell into place when, quite fortuitously, the scientist I contacted for my research on the subject, was the very man who had just proven the link between the use of neonicotinoids and colony collapse – a finding that ultimately cost him his job.

A Winter Grave was born during the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow in 2021. I had to all intents and purposes retired, having turned down all offers of further book contracts to refocus my life on reading for pleasure and pursuing my other great passion – music.

Like most people, I had been following the increasingly alarming warnings on climate change, and had actually read a digest of the report issued by the IPCC (the United Nations Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change), just a few weeks prior to COP26. The report, compiled by hundreds of the world's top climate scientists, was unequivocal. If governments around the world failed to take drastic action to reduce CO2 in the atmosphere by the rapid phasing out of fossil fuels, the world would be staring down the barrel of unstoppable and catastrophic climate change by the end of this decade.

And what happened? A lot of hot air happened. There were many well-intentioned people there, but as we all know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Political and commercial interests prevailed. 'Phasing out' was reduced to a meaningless 'phasing down'. Previous commitments to targets which were nowhere near to being met, were re-stated without conviction. Politicians and business interests were selling out future generations for the sake of a fast buck today.

It made me mad. I still hadn't thought of writing about it, but I determined to educate myself on the subject, and spent the next three months researching the science (as well as the skeptics) in depth. I read papers and articles, reports and digests. I watched hours of video interviews and documentaries. It became clear to me that the science really was irrefutable, and that the climate deniers were either fringe groups of conspiracy theorists who coalesced around all kinds of controversial subjects (anti-vax, for example), or so-called 'think tanks' being funded by the fossil fuel industry to sow the seeds of doubt.

It was only then I realised that I had to write about it.

But here's the danger – and it's something I learned as a writer and storyliner of soap operas many years ago – an 'issue' or a 'theme' is not in itself a story. It might make a good documentary, or a fact-based article or book, but it's not a drama. Drama is about people, and conflict, and unless you can use your research to create characters with whom the reader can empathise, and situations that place them in danger or confrontation, you will alienate, or worse, bore your readers.

The first step is to research your subject thoroughly. Scour the internet for relevant books. Search for articles and documentaries. Seek out official reports. Be prepared to spend weeks, even months, tracking down information. Soak it all up, digest it. Get to understand it in all its minutiae.

But be ready to then throw it all away. Your readers are not interested in anything but the most salient details, and how they impact your characters and your story.

You are never going to be an expert, not in the same way as someone who has been immersed in the subject all of their life. But it's important that you have an understanding of it, because how else will you be able to convey the complexities to others?

Create your own synopses. Boil down the relevant details to easily remembered bullet points. Track down one of those experts I mentioned in the previous paragraph. Establish a relationship in which you can feel free to ask questions. Because, inevitably when you start to develop your story, questions will arise that your research alone can't answer.

And all through that process of research, let your imagination roam. Start to look for the characters and the conflict that are going to bring your story and subject to life. Don't be afraid to let your characters take different sides in the debate – whatever that might be. And, let's face it, when it comes to ecology and the environment the debate often gets ugly and is usually political.

Don't preach to your reader. If you want to make a point, do it through a sympathetic character. So take sides, and remember that conflict is drama, and that neutrality almost never leads to conflict.

With *A Winter Grave,* the subject of climate change was so big, and so momentous, I struggled for a long time to find a story that could possibly encompass it. And it was more than three months into my research before I finally had my eureka moment. I wouldn't write about climate change at all.

I would develop a classic crime thriller – but set it thirty years in the future, in a world already drastically altered by the results of global warming. Climate change wouldn't be the story, but the backdrop to the story.

And by setting it less than thirty years on, in 2051, I was very starkly making the point that rising sea levels, disruptive storms, displaced populations, fires and floods, are not some distant prospect. Instead, they are just around the corner. Many young people are only too acutely aware of that already, but for my generation, who can look back with the realisation that thirty years is nothing in the grand scheme of a life, 2051 will seem like just a breath away.

And that, I hope, will shock people out of their complacency, and bring pressure to bear for change now. Before it's too late. If it isn't already. ■

***A Winter Grave* by Peter May is published by riverrun**

Questions of narrative

Keen to try writing non-fiction from a personal perspective? **James McCreet** describes fusing fictional and factual writing techniques when he made the switch from novels to history.

I’ve accidentally written a history book. It started out as a memoir with some historical research because I didn’t feel qualified to write history. I didn’t study the subject and I know that it is quite rigorous in terms of citing sources and creating an expansive bibliography. In short, I was afraid. My writing experience is limited to novels and some literary criticism so I set out to write something that was broadly novelistic.

Long story short: a memoir was never going to be commercially viable. Nobody is interested in my life. I’m a nobody. But the place I wanted to write about is fascinating to potentially thousands of people – which brought me back to history. I know from my previous novels that the problem with genuine history is the lack of narrative and plot, which are usually imposed in retrospect. In lieu of these, it simply has chronology, which can make for quite a dull reading experience.

History is one thing happening after another. There’s no suspense or expectation because we already know what happened. Often, what happens in history is unexpected or coincidental or just plain incredible. The challenge is to give it the elements of a story – a narrative – even though it was originally a sequence of events. I saw that I had to write a history using novelistic skills.

The challenge

I wanted to tell the story of a single Greek town, Nafplio, which was the nation’s first capital for a handful of years before Athens became the administrative centre. Nafplio has around 3,000 years of history, the early part of which we know almost nothing about and the latter part of which we know much more. It becomes more complex because its history kept jumping between empires: first the Byzantine, then the Franks, then the Venetians, then the Turks, the Venetians again, then the Turks again. As a story, it’s not very linear!

I did have an advantage going into the project. I’ve written a few historical novels and done a lot of research. That taught me how to dig out the best stories, the most interesting characters and the unifying common themes. All of these were good ingredients to build a story. However, the story in a novel was up to me. With history, you have to tell it as it happened. A lot of creative decisions are taken away.

With three thousand years of history, you’re also going to face a lot of ‘and then . . .’ structure. It can become wearing for the reader. There’s no plot! There’s no story! Things just happen because they happened. In this case, they happened multiple times: siege, slaughter, occupation – repeat.

Some solutions

The first important decision I made was to keep the memoir element. If I was using the eyewitness accounts of travellers from various centuries, then my experiences were just as valid. I was a primary source. They saw the town in 1687 or 1823. I lived there 1998-2000. My own experiences could colour the historical events because I’d walked those same streets. The personal perspective could add a narrative dimension to the strictly chronological events.

I also decided not to tell the history as it happened – in order. This would have meant a very thin and vague early section and a back-end loaded with information. Rather, I’d outline the entire history over just a couple of pages in the first chapter to give the reader a broad introductory shape, then handle the rest of the information thematically. Each chapter focuses on a different element of Nafplio's history: its castles, its squares, its famous visitors, its wars, its marine activity, its pleasures etc.

The beauty of this approach is that it begins to start looking like a plot. For example, the second chapter ('Mapping') describes how the town formed over its 3,000 years from rocky peninsula to modern tourist centre. The whole period is covered and we're laying out the foundations of everything to come. The reader has a sense of what it looks like before we get into everything that happened there. This also reinforces the brief summary in the first chapter without repeating the detail.

Critically, each chapter has purposeful omissions. Thus, the Mapping chapter describes the city walls without mentioning how they functioned during various wars. It describes how streets and squares were formed without giving any detail about their role in subsequent events. A particular notable building might be mentioned in passing, but its importance is revealed later. The chapter on war doesn't mention the marine activity of particular battles.

The effect is cumulative. Each chapter adds more detail and different perspectives to what you've previously read. For example, we learn early in the book that the town's first governor was assassinated outside a church. We have to wait for successive chapters to learn more about that church, more about the assassination, more about what happened to the assassins and how the murder affected subsequent events. It's a storyline distributed through the history in the same way as a plot would handle it.

An additional technique is to signpost other information for the reader. In chapter three, say, I mention in passing that Nafplio was famous for its outbreaks of plague and I add a note in parenthesis that there is more information in the War chapter. The War chapter, meanwhile, adds a note that there's more information on the historical discussion about what type of 'plague' it may have been in another chapter. In this way, the history is always referring forwards and backwards as novelistic narrative does, promising and adding context as required to hold the reader's interest.

Extra dimension

Maybe the reader already knows some of Nafplio's history or maybe they're reading all of this for the first time. The latter reader needs to have things explained and contextualised without feeling an overwhelming rush of information. The former reader needs to feel that they're seeing something new and different. How do you please both?

One key is to concentrate on stories. History typically means things happening, whereas a story means things developing in a context that involves characters and outcomes. Good historians combine the two. I tried to fill each chapter with stories involving real people and places to flesh out the basic 'what happened'. Let's take that assassination as an example. The reader knows very early in the book (or before picking it up) that the 'character' dies, but it's necessary to wait to see that scene. First, we need to know that man and his importance so that his death means something. Next, we need to know the full story – not only that he was killed, but his whole journey from home to the church, who killed him and why, how it happened and what happened next. The narration of this scene is identical to fiction writing. It just happens to be true.

There are always stories. These have to form the spine of the history even if they are stepping stones rather than an unbroken line.

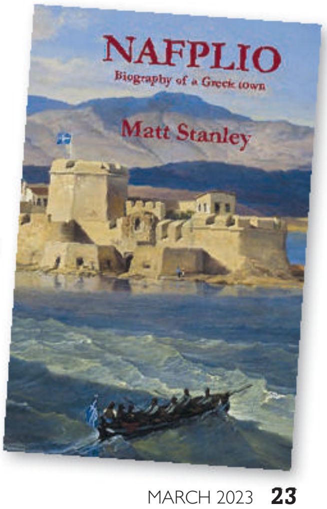
Another way to give the consecutive events more texture and dimension is to digress and discuss. History doesn't exist in a vacuum. It involves various other elements such as psychology, sociology, geography, art, cultural commentary and anything else you like. In a chapter called Heroes, I round up the statues in the town and discuss who is featured in each statue. They are all important figures who lend context to the overall history (and other chapters), but this is also an opportunity to discuss the concept of statues themselves. What purpose do they serve in our society? Why do people attack or ignore them? And what is a hero anyway? Why do we choose to commemorate the people we do?

This kind of discussion makes the history of a small town in Greece relevant to all towns and all history. It causes us to think about familiar things in a new way – not just as 'what happened' but what's happening now and how our present is tomorrow's history. Trite, perhaps – but true.

And then there's that personal element. It's easy to forget the people while focusing on the events. Nafplio's population changed entirely at least three times in its history. That's to say the entire population was either massacred or shipped off and new inhabitants were purposefully moved in to replace the missing. At least three times! History tells us that it happened, but it doesn't tell us what that was like.

This is where the novelist comes in again. Such questions may not have their answers in the sources, but we can imagine entering an empty, ready-made town whose only human traces are stains on the street and perfume on the bed sheets. What a remarkable situation! That's something we can explore in thought and description. Or imagine sitting in the main square with a coffee when they dragged the governor's assassin through it one morning in 1831 to throw his corpse off the walls. It happened. It's true.

***Nafplio: Biography of a Greek Town* is published by Aetos Press under James' other nom de plume Matt Stanley.**



LOUISE HARE

EVERY MURDER MYSTERY NEEDS A LEADING LADY
MISS ALDRIDGE REGRETS
LOUISE HARE

TAP HERE
To read an extract from Miss Aldridge Regrets

The bestselling author explains how the opening of her Jazz-Age murder mystery evolved

Writing a second novel is notoriously tricky and I'm very grateful for some wise advice I received just after signing the publishing contract for my debut: write at least a rough draft of the second novel before the first comes out. Partly because, if your debut does well, the pressure increases. But also, no matter how much you try to avoid reviews and reader comments, it's impossible. It can be easy to obsess over what people love or hate about your first novel, and that makes it harder to focus on what you actually want to write.

Taking this wisdom onboard, I decided to explore a vague idea that I'd pitched to my editor at submission stage in order to hook a two-book deal. One lesson I've learned from writing my first two novels is that I'm not great at short stories. Like its predecessor, my second novel *Miss Aldridge Regrets* began life as an assignment for my MA in Creative Writing. A two and a half thousand-word story rooted in the crime genre. My problem is that my writing tends to be character-led but I also love storytelling. I often end up with too much going on for my short stories to be satisfactory.

At the time of the assignment, I was still trying to finish writing the novel that became my debut, *This Lovely City*. I was editing a scene in which my two protagonists, Lawrie and Evie, go out on a double date to a Soho jazz club. Evie is struggling with a huge secret that she's been keeping from her fiancé and, as she leaves the club, she notices the woman on stage. Although it didn't make the final version, I imagined that Evie saw this glamorous singer and was envious. We often think that confident people have their lives together, that they have everything under control. For whatever reason, this mysterious woman stuck in my head and eventually she became Lena Aldridge.

The original story was about a woman in her mid-twenties living in post-war London, a jazz singer whose ambitions haven't been realised. Instead of the West End stage, she's stuck singing in a dodgy Soho club for a boss who has his fingers in quite a few pies, most of them involving illegal activity. She's onstage one night and watches him die in front of her, choking to death on a cyanide-laced Old Fashioned. At first, it seems that she's simply a witness to the murder, but as the story goes on, it seems that she knows more than she let on in the beginning. The major issue with the short story was that there was too much going on to fit into such a small word count. My tutor also commented that because I had Lena going off to catch the boat-train to Southampton at the end, New York to be her final destination, that I'd left things too up in the air. When I started to seriously think about expanding the piece and was working out if there was enough material there for a novel, I had to consider that transatlantic ticket.

I've always loved travelling by sea, perhaps because it reminds me of family holidays to France when I was a kid. Overnight ferries and being allowed to stay up later than usual. Peering over the railings into the waves below. But also, bad things can happen at sea. I remember posters and leaflets at ferry terminals, showing missing people, presumed gone overboard. The murkiness of laws and legal jurisdiction at sea. The more I thought about it, the more perfect it seemed, and then I landed on the Queen Mary. An icon of that age, when everyone who was anyone sailed on her. I took Lena from 1950 and planted her in 1936, the year that the Queen Mary made her maiden voyage, and the pieces started to fit into place.

Although the novel isn't exactly a pastiche of the golden age novel, I did want to use elements of classic crime literature. I write quite visually in that I picture a scene first before I write it. I love the aesthetic of the David Suchet Poirot adaptations and had that 1930s glamour in mind throughout. I was also interested in what would drive a murderer to not only kill, but to come up with a devious scheme. There are also elements that I'm drawn to in Patricia Highsmith's writing that I wanted to play with. The idea that you might understand a killer's motives, or at least in some way want them to get away with it, as in *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Or, thinking of *Strangers on a Train*, getting into something that seems to begin as a joke but then turns serious.

What I also love about Highsmith in particular, is that she isn't worried about writing perfect or likeable characters. While I intend for the reader to like Lena, I know that some won't because her behaviour and her personal moral code might not chime with theirs. She drinks too much and she sometimes takes drugs. She's had at least one love affair with a married man and she certainly isn't prudish when it comes to sex. That doesn't mean, however, that she isn't a good friend to those she trusts. She had a strong bond with her father who has recently passed away, and she feels guilty when she does something she knows is wrong. In essence, she's not a bad person, just a survivor.

For me, writing in first person feels a bit 'method'. I immerse myself into that character's head, in a way that I don't when writing in third person. I knew from the beginning that the novel would only work from Lena's perspective. It was an easy decision to choose first person because I knew that, as well as being a 'golden age' murder mystery, I wanted to explore her life as a mixed-race woman in the 1930s. She's also working class, thrown into a situation where she is not only having to pass as white, but also mix with extremely rich and privileged people. All while trying to survive a transatlantic crossing with a murderer!

> **"It was an easy decision to choose first person... I wanted to explore her life as a mixed-race woman in the 1930s."**

Chapter One of the novel isn't actually the beginning of the story. Lena may have just boarded the Queen Mary, where most of the action takes place, but several key events happen the week before, told through flashback chapters. This was a device that I experimented with in *This Lovely City*, and so I felt comfortable using it again. It was also a great way to keep up the pace. If I had written the novel chronologically, it would have taken too long for Lena to get onboard the ship. Once onboard though, there's also the issue of having to wait for a murder to take place. Using the flashbacks meant that not only could Lena be in the main setting almost immediately, but there was the added bonus that a murder had already taken place. Lena does things in the opening chapters that may seem odd at first. The idea is that as the reader discovers what happened the week before, her behaviour will come to make sense.

Splicing the two timelines was a lot of fun to do. I wrote the flashback chapters in a separate document first of all. Because I don't plot very much, I didn't know exactly what was going to happen in those chapters ahead of writing them, other than that there would be a murder and that a certain event would result in Lena being given the first-class ticket on the Queen Mary. Writing the two sections side by side really helped me because in the 'week before' scenes I was really getting to know who Lena was, her background and her motivation for travelling to New York, while in the scenes at sea I was dealing with the aftermath of what has already happened to her, as well as setting up for more murder! It really helped keep me excited about the writing.

Before the reader gets to Chapter One, there is a prologue. Prologues often have a bad reputation. They often get used to fill in backstory, or they give too much away. This prologue was added in during the second draft, after my editor had read the novel. Because the first murder in the novel doesn't occur until around a quarter of the way through, we decided that a prologue would be a great way to show a murder in advance. However, I didn't want to repeat a scene that comes later on in the novel, so I decided to try writing a couple of pages from the murderer's point of view. It was quite fun to think about events from their perspective, but also a little tricky. It can't be obvious who they are, and thinking about who they were, their gender, how people around them might react to them, was quite challenging. In the end, it turned out so well that I decided to add in further passages from the murderer's perspective.

SHELF LIFE

Simon Scarrow, the No 1 bestselling thriller author, rounds up the five reads that most gripped his imagination

CENTENARY EDITION
ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF
THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH

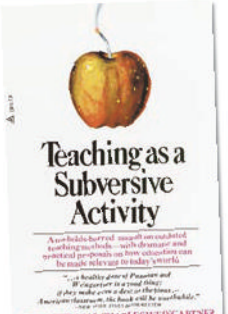
The Eagle of the Ninth by Rosemary Sutcliff

'I came across this when I was ten years old. A set of the books was gathering dust in the class-room cupboard and my teacher recommended it to me. The book had a battered blue cloth cover and the names of a dozen or so pupils who had been issued the book before me so it already felt like a piece of history. I was immediately gripped by Sutcliff's novel about a young Roman officer serving in ancient Britain. Having only recently come to live in Britain I knew how it felt to be something of an outsider, just like the three main characters, not to mention "Cub". Much as I enjoyed the book the first time round it was not until I read it to my sons, many years later, that I grasped just how fine a writer Sutcliff was. Her depiction of a chariot ride in the honeyed light of a late summer afternoon transports the reader to the moment in a way that few authors achieve.'

HORNBLOWER
C.S. FORESTER
THE HAPPY RETURN

The Happy Return by C S Forester

'A few years later my father pressed this novel into my hands when I was unwell and off school for a week. At the time I was a typical teenager and therefore not an avid reader. However, the novel's account of an isolated British frigate's fight for survival on the far side of the world quickly won me over, particularly the epic battle against a much more powerful Spanish ship that takes up nearly a quarter of the novel. It's not just that Forester is an excellent writer, he knew how important characters are to the success of a story. Hornblower and his close friend and subordinate, Bush, are vividly drawn and the reader cares deeply for them. Their relationship across a range of novels became something of a blueprint for later novelists to replicate across a range of settings. Every so often I re-read *The Happy Return* and then get drawn into the entire series all over again. It's a pure joy to read and few writers in the genre have ever matched Forester's talent.'

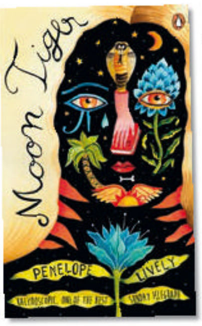

Teaching as a Subversive Activity
NEIL POSTMAN & CHARLES WEINGARTNER

Teaching as a Subversive Activity by Neil Postman

'There is a generation of teachers who are very familiar with this provocative book. Postman's starting point is that teaching is a vital survival tool and he quotes Hemingway's dictum that the most important attribute of any writer is to develop an effective bullshit detector. The book exploded many of the concepts that I took for granted about teaching and learning and forced me to rethink how I went about my job from first principals. So much of what passes for education these days is little more than training. The priority of any worthwhile education system is that it equips students with the confidence to ask questions. An educational qualification should be treated as a license to doubt, not an end in itself. It is sad that the book is out of print at a time when the profession desperately needs teachers to challenge the crushing orthodoxy imposed by politicians who neither value education, nor understand what its purpose is.'

Watchmen by Alan Moore and David Gibbons

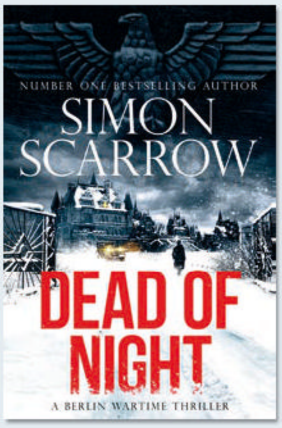
‘I recall, with some anger, the incredulity of Sue Lawley when she questioned Lenny Henry’s choice of *Watchmen* at the conclusion of his interview on *Desert Island Discs*. Moore’s superb creation of an alternative world with its cast of damaged superheroes is one of the most sophisticated, gripping and moving works of literature from the last century. This was the point when the graphic novel really grew up and became mainstream and lead the wave of innovations that swept through the comic book industry. It’s hard to briefly describe the complexity of the richly layered narrative and the way that Moore and Gibbons embrace postmodernity to let *Watchmen* play out across a range of texts and across texts within texts. It’s also hard to convey the quality of the writing, the sharp delineation of characters and emotional range that its creators lay before the reader. It’s a work that handsomely repays revisiting, if only to smile at the sly mise-en-scene before the emotional punch to the guts that comes at the end of this brilliant graphic novel.’



Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively

‘For such a slim novel it’s hard to believe the scale of the ambition of its narrator, an elderly woman, close to death, who decides to tell the “history of the world”. It is her personal history – given that the only world any of us ever knows is the one circumscribed by the span of our individual lives. The structure of the novel challenges the basis of the autobiographical genre and exposes its essential dishonesty. Memory of life is not tidily chronological but a perpetually shifting assortment of significant moments whose significance is entirely subjective. As in the evocation of a scent, or song, that can transport us back so precisely and often shockingly to a point in life. By turns the novel is thoughtful, elegiac and very moving, and always written with a fine lyricism as it lays bare the human condition. All of us, no matter how much we love and are loved, will die alone and the world we created for ourselves will die with us. It’s a book that still haunts me.’

SIMON SCARROW



© Bill Waters

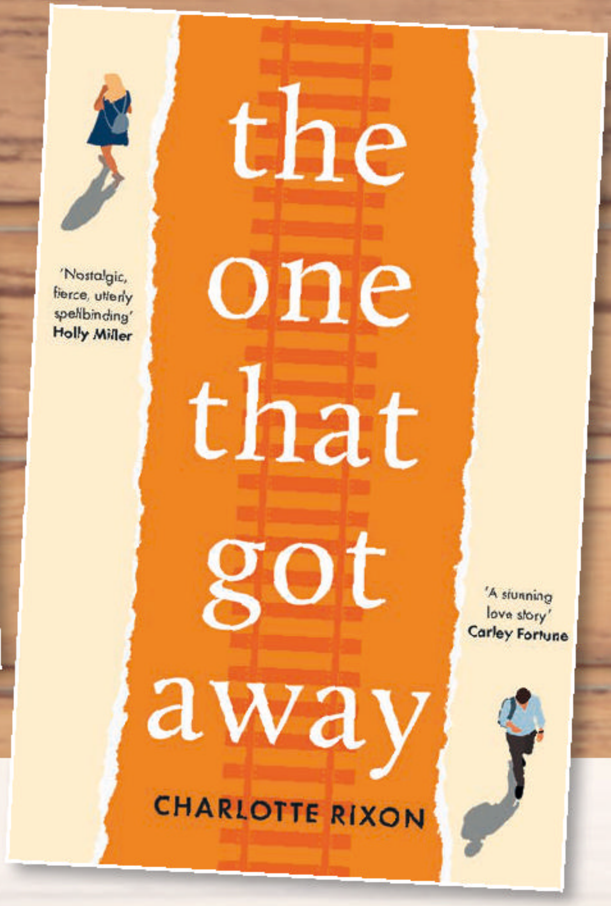
‘*Dead of Night* is the second novel in my series following the cases of Inspector Horst Schenke of the Berlin Kriminalpolizei during the Second World War. Set during the bitter winter at the start of 1940, Schenke is called upon to investigate the death of a doctor and the fate of children sent to an isolated institution. At first the two threads appear unconnected, but when Schenke grasps the link he is pitched into the heart of one of the darkest secrets of the Nazi regime.

‘I’d like to say that I have a routine with respect to writing… but I don’t. I find it hard to break off from the research and it’s only when my editor calls to remind me of the deadline that I go into action. Not something it is wise to emulate. Having moved to Mauritius I am working with a local university to set up a new program. “Creative Writing as a Commercial Activity” starts from the basis that students aspire to make a living from writing rather than just focusing on the literary quality of their work. It’s an aspect that is overlooked in most existing courses.

‘I don’t like to over-plan novels as it robs the writing process of much of the excitement and surprise that I enjoy. The poet Robert Frost once remarked “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” That’s why my synopsis for a novel is rarely more than half a page long. I know where a book is going to be set. I know who their opponents will be and I know the challenge they must overcome. Everything else is up for grabs and quite often my characters will take things off in a very different direction to the one I anticipated. It’s delightful when that happens and points to the importance of authenticity in writing. Characters must act in a manner that is consistent with their identity and beliefs and the writer must have faith in those characters, even if they don’t do what the writer expects from time to time.

‘One of the mistakes made by aspiring writers is to mimic what seems to be selling well in the bookshops. The danger of this approach is that the market may well have moved on by the time they can complete a manuscript and find an agent. Also, trying to replicate someone else’s success undermines the authenticity of the writer. You have to write what YOU want to read and you have to write it in YOUR voice. Readers can tell if your heart is in your writing, or it isn’t. In the case of the latter, if the writer can’t be bothered to believe in their work, then why should the reader? Believe in your writing and you will become a better writer, and your readers will come to trust your writing and lose themselves in the story that set before them.’

CHARLOTTE RIXON



The author of suspense novels and now a love story describes her long and difficult journey to getting a book deal – and why she wouldn't have it any other way

'I'd always wanted to be a writer, ever since I could read. I loved reading and making up stories and it just felt completely natural to write my own. It was very instinctual, rather than a conscious decision.

'I wrote several "novels" as a child, all painstakingly typed up on my electric typewriter (still my most favourite Christmas present ever!). I even sent one of these books off to Penguin when I was about 12. They replied very nicely saying that perhaps I'd like to read some of it out to my class at school (needless to say, I didn't do this!).

'I started writing again seriously after I left university. I joined a creative writing forum (this was back in the dark ages of the internet when such things were quite new) and "met" a lot of other aspiring authors on there. You could upload your work for critique, and it was such a supportive, encouraging place. I didn't know anyone who worked in publishing and so I had no connections, but through the forum I met lots of other writers. They were mostly unpublished, but a few already had book deals and were really kind, mentoring us and educating us in the mysterious dark arts of publishing.

'It was through this forum that I learned that to get published, I needed an agent. I finished the book I was writing, edited it as best I could and started submitting. Of course, I had plenty of standard rejections but then one day I heard from a young agent who was just starting out. She'd been passed my novel by a colleague and wanted to meet. We went for a coffee, hit it off and she offered to sign me. I was one of her very first clients. Her name was Caroline Hardman and she's still my agent today, 15 years later.

'We worked together on the book, and submitted it to publishers about six months later. I am pleased that I was quite prepared for it to fail, because it did. No one wanted to buy it, but a few of the publishers were positive about my writing and wanted to see my next book. So I went away, licked my wounds for a bit and wrote another one. Both Caroline and I agreed it was much more commercial than the first. We were cautiously optimistic about it selling, and within a week of it being submitted to editors, we had some encouraging responses.

'But then the rejections came in. And the editor who expressed the most interest didn't manage to get it past the rest of her team, as it was too similar to a book she had bought just a week before. I knew it would be hard, but I didn't know it would be this hard. To spend the best part of four years working on two novels only to have both of them come to nothing is very difficult.

'I wrote another book, but by then my heart wasn't in it, and both Caroline and I agreed it wasn't up to scratch. Disheartened, I stopped writing for a while, and instead focused on my day job. I started my own PR agency, which was surprisingly successful. It was a relief to feel I had some control over the success of my efforts for once, and for the next few years I didn't write a word of fiction.

'I sold my business when I became pregnant. It was during maternity leave that I wrote my debut suspense novel, *The Rival*. After a few minor revisions, Caroline sent it out, and we had a pre-empt from a major publisher (Quercus) within a week, followed by an offer from another publisher later that day.

'Since then, I've published four more suspense novels with Quercus, and I'm under contract for my sixth.

'During lockdown, I realised that I wanted to write something a bit different. *The One That Got Away*, the story of two people who fall in love at university but are torn apart by a tragic incident, was nicknamed my "midlife crisis" novel in my house. I never really expected it to get published. But I sent it to Caroline anyway and she was really enthusiastic. She sent it out almost immediately – with no revisions, which was a first!

'I heard that Rachel, my editor at Head of Zeus, loved it after three days. I'll never forget that email. And it then went on to sell in various countries around the world, as well as for a six-figure pre-empt in the US, which really was a dream come true.

'I've always believed that things happen for a reason. I don't regret all the years I spent writing books that didn't see the light of day. They're part of a very necessary apprenticeship that I'm happy to have undertaken. And they've made me feel truly grateful for the position I'm in now.

'I had a long road to publication – nearly ten years, three unpublished manuscripts, countless rejections – but seeing all six of my books lined up on the shelf in my office reminds me that it's all been worth it.'

Charlotte's tips for getting published

- Polish your book until it shines. I know it's painful but don't send out work until it's really ready. It's not because you only get one chance to impress (I'm not sure that's true) but more because you don't want to be discouraged by negative feedback on a book that's not quite there yet.
- Get involved with the writing community. It's such a warm, welcoming industry and writers are generally so supportive to other writers. It's a lonely business and writer peers truly make all the difference.
- Read within your genre! It sounds obvious but if you don't read other people's novels, your likelihood of getting published is incredibly small. Publishing is a business, and your book needs to have commercial value in order for a publisher to be interested in it, so you need to understand the market and what people are reading.

Rachel Faulkner-Willcocks, editor at Head of Zeus

'There is nothing quite like a love story. As an editor of commercial fiction, there is a gorgeous, relatable, enthralling love story at the heart of most of the books I publish. But good love stories are so much more than happy-ever-afters; they can be painful, heart-breaking, dark, even frightening. One of the things that stood out for me about *The One That Got Away* is that Charlotte explores how a single relationship can be each of these different things and more, and no less beautiful for it. And first love is often the most intense and maddening of all. From page one, I felt this was a story readers would be drawn to. Charlotte's talent for creating flawed but painfully convincing characters really stands out. Clara and Benjamin are not perfect, and they certainly aren't perfect for each other, but their love is so visceral and real, you can't help but root for them. This is the perfect book for anyone who remembers the feverish intensity of their first relationship – or their first heartbreak; or for anyone who has ever wondered "what if" (which is, surely, all of us?).'

***The One That Got Away* by Charlotte Rixon is published in ebook and hardback, by Head of Zeus, on 2 February**

The world of writing

Playing dead, poetry in motion ... Miscellany and our readers' news and views...

TOWERING ACHIEVEMENT

Writer-director Mike Flanagan is to adapt Stephen King's magnum opus, *The Dark Tower* novels, for Amazon Studios as a five-season TV series followed by two feature films, *writes Gary Dalkin*. Flannigan has written and directed two well-received adaptations of King's work before – *Gerald's Game* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019) – as well as the much praised mini-series version of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House.*

The new adaptation has Stephen King's approval, but before work can begin Flannigan and his producing partner Trevor Macy at Intrepid Pictures have to complete a mini-series version of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher.*

There have been many attempts to bring *The Dark Tower* to the screen, but the only one which made it to the screen so far was a misfire released in 2017 starring Idris Elba and Matthew McConaughey. King has often described the series as his take on *The Lord of the Rings* crossed with a Sergio Leone spaghetti western, and certainly if Amazon's ersatz *Tolkien Rings of Power* is anything to go by, this new version will have the budget and running time to do the books justice.

STAR LETTER

MAKING SENSE OF THINGS

There is a small pile of magazines that sits in a corner of my room. These publications cover all sorts of interests. Some are all about current affairs, some cover vegetarian cooking and lifestyles, and, of course, some are all about writing. And I plunder the pages of these publications for ideas, inspiration, and information.

There are issues of *Writing Magazine* in that little pile that date back a couple of years.

I am an anxiety-riddled thirty-something (though not as badly riddled as I have been in the past), and I am just trying to make sense of everything. I am just trying to be okay, like everyone else. And I think that writing helps me to sift and sort through all those thoughts and feelings that might otherwise fly through me unchecked. Overwhelming me to the point of physical sickness.

With pen and pad, I sometimes go through those publications I have filed away, taking notes. Sometimes they lead to a writing project, sometimes just to a bit of fun, and sometimes to a little failure. All of value.

Those that I exhaust of ideas I drop into the recycling bin, grateful for all I found within, and the little journeys that started in those pages.

So, thank you for being one of those publications in which I find information and inspiration. And a small part of that which helps me make sense of things.

PHILIP SIMONS
Stevington, Bedfordshire

THE No1 BESTSELLER
Writers' & Artists' YEARBOOK
2023

The star letter each month earns a copy of the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2023*, courtesy of Bloomsbury. Write to **letters@writersnews.co.uk**.

HEALTHY WRITING

Writing has always been a release for me, a way of reflecting on situations and life in general. The pleasure gained from writing about happy events is no greater than the release of stress in confronting difficult decisions and illness, as I experienced three years ago. On diagnosis of breast cancer, I sat down to write about emotions, loss of control of this situation and keeping some semblance of sanity. Writing became my best friend and confidant through the operations and treatment (and Covid) over a period of twelve months and totalled over 100,000 words.

Running became a daily reflective time for my unread written words. Last year I completed one of your writing courses with Lynne Hackles. I then submitted three letters to different magazines, two were published and one winning a prize for star letter. Thank you Lynne, you gave me the confidence I needed. I spent the rest of the year training my new dog (Bob) to run with me and now have lots of stories about Bob.

Although running keeps me physically fit, writing maintains my mental health and with this arctic weather running is definitely out of the question. My aim for 2023 is to submit some articles and hopefully begin to turn my unread words into a book.

LYNN ISAACSON-YATES
Helsby, Cheshire

PLAYING DEAD

Susan Meachen
Never Ever
Susan Meachen

We're all encouraged to be pro-active about author publicity but coming back from the great beyond might be taking it a bit far, *writes Ellie Palmer.*

A thought-to-be-dead author has suddenly reappeared online and announced she is still alive, much to the shock – and anger – of her fans.

Susan Meachen, a self-published Romance author, supposedly died by suicide back in September 2020 when someone claiming to be her daughter posted the news of her death in the writer's Facebook fan group. Her followers were distraught.

The fan group remained open to serve as a promotional vehicle for Meachen's work in memoriam, and this supposed daughter posted numerous times via Meachen's account encouraging her fans to buy her books in memory of her.

Fast forward two years and the Romance author has dramatically returned from the hinterland alive!

In a statement she posted to her Facebook fan group, she claimed, 'my family did what they thought was best for me and I can't fault them for it.' Her antics have triggered a rather heavy online pile-on, with some claiming it was all an elaborate ploy to secure sympathy sales for her books that were tanking.

You can always rely on Facebook for a bit of drama. It would make a fantastic plot for a future *New York Times* bestseller, that's for sure.

GETTING STARTED

by Timothy Herslett

Why don't I write something else
or try to translate into Welsh?
Rejection is hurting
(when I could be flirting)
Or maybe I am on the shelf?

I don't mean among the great names
To be honest, the genuine shame's
that I can't get going
the text isn't flowing –
I might be more suited to games.

But writing's compelling, I know it
I must be more brave and quite stoic.
For that's how my mind
is truly inclined.
I'll carry on till I'm decrepit.

• I think Timothy speaks for us all! Bravo – Ed

(PUT IT) RIGHT TIME?

Our English homework had been to write an essay entitled 'Our Day Off'. I would have been nine at the time. Excitedly I set to work on it with enthusiastic help from my parents both of whom had medical experience in what we'd call today, paramedics.

I was good at English and a favourite of our English teacher for getting my homework finished and handed in on time. So not surprisingly I'd assumed I would be top or near the top with my essay.

I wasn't: far from it. The teacher ridiculed me for not only choosing a poor subject for my day off, namely a day off sick, but also for filling my essay with lists of imagined symptoms, medications, pulse rates and temperatures taken during the day, all, of course, suggested by my parents.

I was crestfallen but somehow managed to hide my misery in the classroom. But the ridicule stayed with me for life and engendered in me the fear that I could never write, or, indeed, grow up to be a teacher.

Reading Daisy Blacklock's extraordinary Star Letter in *WM* (Jul) woke me up. It's within you not without you that counts.

Now, many years later, it's time for me to at last start trying to do what I've always wanted to do. Right a teacher's wrong and write.

PETER STEVENS
Liverpool

POT KETTLE

© Joseph Campbell on Unsplash

So ironic you couldn't make it up, a petition was launched in December calling on the Board of WorldCon (World Science Fiction Convention) to 'rescind the status of guest of honour from Sergei Lukyanenko' due to his support of Russia's war on Ukraine, *writes Gary Dalkin*. Lukyanenko is best known in the west for his urban fantasy 'Watch' series, including *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, both of which were turned into successful films. The irony is that the 2023 WorldCon is being held in August in Chengdu, China, a country with one of the worst human rights records in the world, as a consequence of which many authors and fans have decided to boycott the entire event. At the time of writing the petition, hosted on AVAAZ.org, had received 1,212 signatures.

GET THE write idea

Explore how place affects the dynamics of a story in these creative writing exercises to try right now

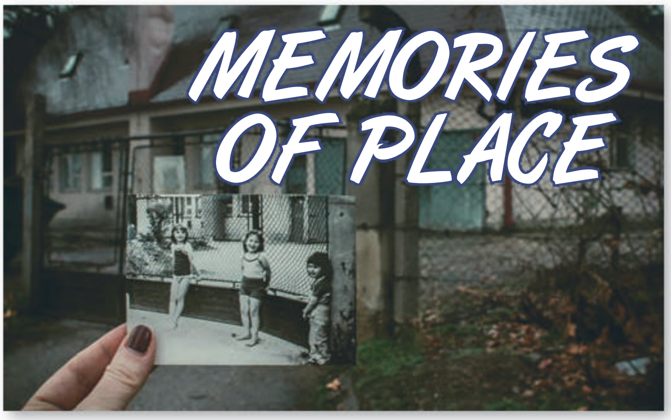


Photo by Anita Jankovic on Unsplash

MEMORIES OF PLACE

Explore the significance of a memorable place from the past.

Think of a place that held particular meaning, either for you or a character, at some point in the past.

What was the place? How would you describe it?

What's the story that makes the place significant?

How do personal circumstances impact on the way the place is remembered?

Write two passages:

1) Conveying the place as it was at the time the memory was created.

2) Conveying the memory of the place.

Photo by Somnox Sleep on Unsplash

THE DAY AHEAD

Imagine a conversation.

Who are these people? Where are they, and why?

What is their relationship, and what does the day ahead hold for each of them?

Are they spending the day together, or separately?

How does the place where they are impact on their plans?

Once you've decided on who your characters are, write out the conversation they're having as they prepare for the day ahead.

Photo by Christopher Burns on Unsplash

TRICK OF THE LIGHT

Write about how the light falls.

First of all, go for a walk or look around the house to find a place where the light falls in a way that makes you notice it.

Then, think about how the light falls – the quality of the light and how it affects what's around it. Notice particular details: colours, textures, how it transforms surrounding objects.

Note down any particular words and phrases that spring to mind.

When you're ready, write a paragraph or passage of poetry with the falling light as its subject.

UNDERWATER

Photo by Tim Marshall on Unsplash

Explore the sensation of being submerged.

Imagine you or a character are below the surface in a large, unconfined body of water.

How will you describe what it feels like to be underwater? What are the sights, sounds, sensations?

How might the body feel in the water?

How might it be different from being submerged in water in a more confined space, ie a bath or a swimming pool?

Write for 20 minutes.

Campfire

Photo by Önder Örtel on Unsplash

Consider cooking outside in cold weather.

Outdoor picnics are common in warm weather, but why might someone be lighting a fire and cooking over it outside, in the cold?

Use this idea as the start for a new piece of writing in any form – narrative or non-fiction – that conveys any of the following:

- The life of someone who is cooking outside as the weather becomes colder.
- The warmth of the fire and the anticipation of eating or drinking something hot as a contrast to the weather.
- The scents, sounds and smells of someone cooking over the fire in the cold.

Photo by Emma Simpson on Unsplash

WOODLAND WALK

Use a stroll in the woods as the starting point for new writing.

Where will your autumn walk take you, creatively?

Will it lead you to a poem or passage of prose about the colours and textures of the time of year? Might it suggest a story where the walk is a key point in the narrative? Will it be something else altogether?

Whatever it is you write, use the season as atmospherically as you can in your writing about place.

STREET MUSICIANS

Photo by Gabe Pierce on Unsplash

Create a scene, setting or story.

Where are your street musicians? What kind of music are they playing? What's the occasion? How are the people around them responding?

What effect does the presence of the musicians have on the atmosphere of the place where they're playing?

How are you, the writer, responding to the musicians and their music? What kind of feelings, effects and impressions might you write about?

Write about the street musicians and their effect for 15 minutes in any style or form.

Photo by Taowfiqu Barbhuiya on Unsplash

CLEANING UP

Why is there a mess and where is it?

What needs cleaning up? Why?

How did it get like that? Is it a one-off or an everyday occurence?

Who is doing the cleaning and what do they feel about it?

Use the ideas you come up with to create a storyline that begins with something that needs to be cleaned up.

Write the first paragraph to set the scene.

Get more prompts every day with *The Writer's App*, available for Apple and Android devices

Brush strokes

Create new work on an art theme in these writing group exercises from **Julie Phillips**

Creating something out of nothing is magical. Artists pull inspiration out of the ether and transform it into a work of beauty and it's the same with writing. So this month your group are going to pick up their paint brushes, plunge their hands into clay and be creative in a different way. The world is their canvas.

The artists' eye

Ask the group to think about works of art they admire. It could be a painting, a sculpture or any other art work they find interesting. What is it about that art that moves them? When they look at that piece of art, what do they interpret from it? What do they think the artist is trying to say with that piece? What statement are they making?

When you are writing, what are you trying to say? Your choice of words and tone can make a big difference to the scene you are writing, just as the artists' choice of colour, shading and composition points the viewer in a certain direction.

What am I?

Pass round a few images of different artworks from different genres: impressionist, surrealist, abstract, cubist, to name a few. What are the differences and similarities? Explore the artists' use of colour, shape and form. What effects have they used within their art to suggest the subject of that art? With traditional art, it's usually clear what the subject is: a portrait, still life or a landscape for instance, but with impressionism, abstract art, etc., the lines may be blurred.

This is the same with writing. What the writer has written can be interpreted in different ways and just like the audience viewing art, the reader reading words in a book or magazine will form their own picture in their head about what is going on in a scene.

A dab hand

Ask the group to research some different art forms from around the world such as Rangoli, popular in India and a huge part of Diwali celebrations, involving beautiful, repeated colourful patterns, often made from chalk or vibrantly coloured paint powder, or the Swedish Dala painting, traditionally depicting scenes from the bible or flowers. Where does their chosen art originate from and what are some of the subjects they show? What techniques do they use and what kinds of art supplies do they use?

Research is a big part of a writers' life, so practising research skills here will also help with writing. You might get a non-fiction piece out of your research, or be able to weave some of your research into a fiction piece. Learning about different art practices from around the world can also provide great inspiration for writing projects.

Get some perspective

Take the group outside, weather permitting, and take a walk in the local area. Look up at the buildings and note the different architecture. Look at the angles and shapes – how do they differ between time periods? If the weather is bad or you're unable to get out and about, use Google maps or Google Earth, or similar, to take a virtual walk around.

A bird's eye view

Now it's time to zoom in on the area walked around using Google maps, Google Earth or other apps that allow you to see the world from above. There is a big difference between looking at a place from ground level and then taking a look from above. The whole area changes and you might not recognise where you are. You see things from above that you might not notice, or just can't see from ground level.

This will help you with your writing as you learn to put things in about your setting that are important for the reader to know and that foreshadows something that might happen later in the piece, or give the reader a better idea of the setting they are reading about.

Hands on

Finally, it's time to release the inner artist in you and have a go at different arts. Have available water-colour paints and paper, felt tips, coloured pencils, stencils, air drying clay, ink printing sets or stamps, coloured powder paints and any other art supplies the group might have between them and have a go at creating an art masterpiece of your own. Pick a theme, genre of painting and away you go. Hold a mini art gallery afterwards so everyone can view and comment on the art pieces created.

Making art is very different to writing because you use your hands and brain in a different way. It's so easy to become absorbed in the process of making art that it frees your brain, and will inspire you to find different ways of expressing yourself in your writing, as well as being a lot of fun. W

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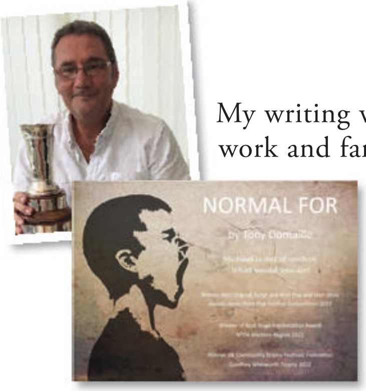
Front of stage



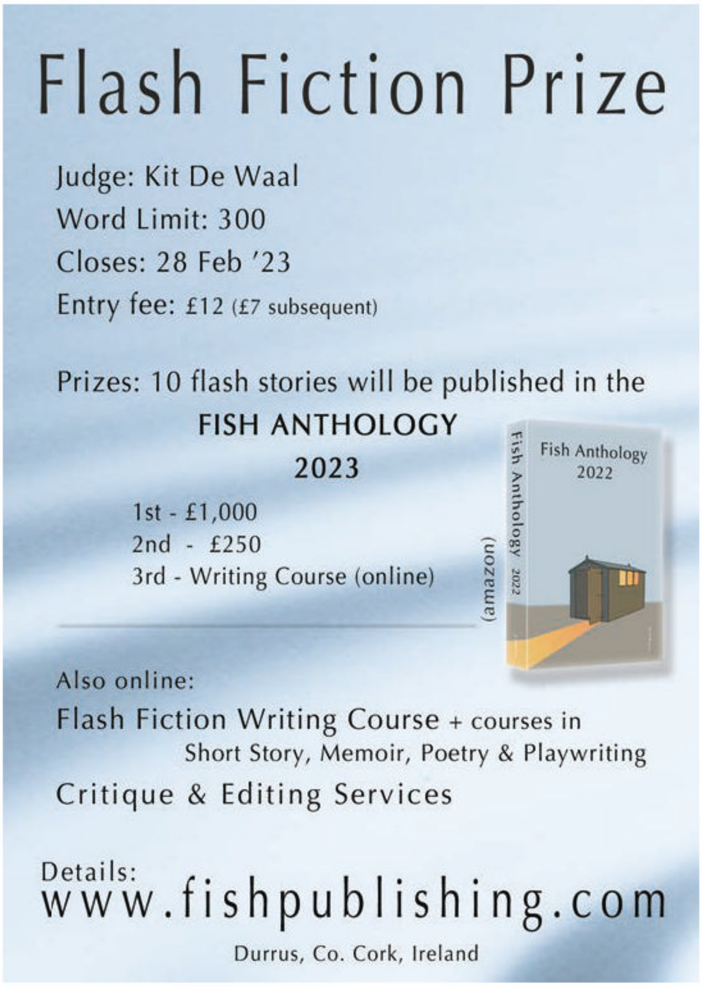
My writing very much took a back seat to work and family commitments until eight years ago, *writes subscriber Tony Domaille.*

I'd had a handful of short stories published, and some success with youth theatre, but cutting my working hours led to my finally having the time to concentrate on writing.

My first published script, *Every Pantomime That Ever There Was* (now a Lazy Bee Scripts Best Seller) was the catalyst for much more stage writing. Then, in 2016, I began to find success writing new one-act dramas for festival competitions. *A Single Moment*, the story of a hopeless gambler won nominations and an award, and the experience taught me what competitions were looking for. Then *Me & You* won the Best Play and four other awards in 2020, *Life in the Cloud* won Best Original Script and two other awards the following year, and in 2022 *Normal For*, the story of a teacher's concerns for a boy in her class, won six awards and went on to win the UK Community Drama Festivals Association Award for Best Original Script.

Having the time to write, find opportunities and push myself, has led to my plays being published and produced in eighteen countries, from Theatre 80 in New York to Australia. I don't suppose I'll ever be another Pinter, but knowing my plays are seen by so many people gives me a real buzz.

I'm often asked where I get my ideas, and the answer to that is everywhere! But when I'm asked how I became published I say, 'By keeping going and never being afraid to learn.'


Flash Fiction Prize

Judge: Kit De Waal
Word Limit: 300
Closes: 28 Feb '23
Entry fee: £12 (£7 subsequent)

Prizes: 10 flash stories will be published in the
FISH ANTHOLOGY
2023

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'Gary Dalkin is a thoughtful and highly professional editor whose keen eye for detail is underpinned by many years' experience. I recommend Gary to anyone.' Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning author Tricia Sullivan

contact Gary to edit your book, story or manuscript

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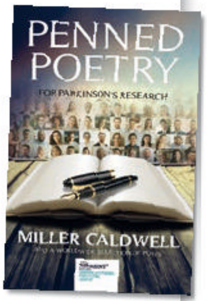
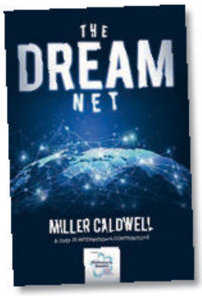
As it is in Heaven
As it is in Heaven 2
Ghost Crystal

Miller's (inspiring) tale





It was a plate of soup, *writes subscriber Miller Caldwell.*

I could not take it with a constantly shaking spoon. After a series of hospital tests I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease last year and of course the tremor in my right hand made me realise I could no longer be an author. I wondered what activities I could do to keep this 72 year old former author amused/entertained/occupied?

Then a thought occurred. I could edit or compile but not write a long novel. I have a Parkinson's nurse and a support group and I learned they were within five years of a cure of this ailment. What could I do to expedite that cure? I contacted my Dutch friend and poet Hannie. She had many contacts around the world and so from Bulgaria, Albania, Pakistan, Australia, The Netherlands, Siberia, Belgium, Germany and Eire, poems flooded in to add to my Facebook requests for poems. I asked for four poems from each poet together with the background to their poems and a snapshot of their faces.

They all obliged. What's more they were all in perfect English. It was fun collecting these international award-winning poets and their snapshots. The book was published by CityStone Publishers who wished to identify with the charity and so *Penned Poetry for Parkinson's Research*, which has 220 pages, was published pro gratis in May 2022.

Although I don't have Alzheimer's disease, I have Mild Cognitive Impairment which is a lesser form of Dementia. I had identified another charity book to raise funds for Alzheimer's research. This time I thought I could add a few to my own dreams. I had no idea how popular this subject would be, yet again a multitude of dream contributions came from all over the world. *A Dream Net* was published in October 2022 by Clink Street publishers who have given me a generous discount due to the book's charity status.

But with regular medication and exercises from the book *Goodbye Parkinson's; Hello Life* by Dr Alex Kerten, my tremor has diminished to the point that I feel I could write another book. All I need now is inspiration to find a story.

Publication in instalments

Despite having fallen headfirst into having my first novel published in 2014, the process of getting my second novel published was anything but easy, *writes subscriber Katherine Blessan.*

Home Truths with LADY GREY
KATHERINE BLESSAN

I began writing *Home Truths with Lady Grey* (despite some editorial recommendations to change the title of my book, it has stayed the same throughout!), in 2015 and with some stops and starts and other writing projects in between, it has finally been published. It was submitted to 52 agents and publishers within that time. I was about to self-publish when I got the surprising offer of publication from The Conrad Press, a small but very ambitious hybrid publisher at the end of November 2021. November was in fact the deadline I set myself to get a publisher and James Essinger just beat me to it!

The publication process has not been a one-off date all wrapped up with a pretty bow. In February, struggling with the realisation that I was not going to be allowed to pay Clays by credit card for the first print run, I called James to tell him I couldn't afford it, and he suggested I publish it as an ebook in the first instance. So, the ebook came out on the 27th March, with the print book available from 4 May.

Having been inspired by Joanna Penn of *The Creative Penn* podcast, I also decided to bring my novel out as an audiobook simultaneously. Using a screenwriters and actors' Facebook page I was a part of, I put out a call for an actor who'd be happy to do an audiobook on a royalties-only basis and with no difficulty at all, I manged to find the fantastic Rebecca Parr to narrate my novel. With a few challenges in between – I hadn't realised how important highlighting the sections where I wanted a northern accent in advance were rather than just relying on her to pick up on my written dialect as clues! – we managed to publish the audiobook

Mewsing on life

For Such A Time As This
Dewberry
Landing on All Four Paws
The Further Adventures of Ollie the Cat
LANDING ON AL
The Diary of a Ki

I've had my website on cats for twenty years and one of my cats, Ollie, wrote his diaries for the humour section, *writes subscriber Pauline Dewberry*.

These were very popular and many of my subscribers suggested that they should be published. Before I could edit them and put them into a publishable format, however, life got in the way, and I found myself having to deal with an unexpected health issue.

As someone who often writes about what is going on in my life as a way of making sense of it, it just seemed natural to me to make notes about this journey I now found myself on. Over the years, *Writing Magazine* has been inspirational to me, so I entered *For Such a Time as This* in a book deal competition, for which I was shortlisted. That spurred me on, and I decided to publish it on Amazon Kindle in January 2020 and then in paperback by The Conrad Press in July 2020. *For Such a Time as This* is my account of living with acute myeloid leukaemia from diagnosis to remission.

Ollie's Diaries were beckoning me from the drawer where they'd languished while I'd put my efforts into not dying, and I looked at them again thinking that I could probably make a trilogy of them. *Landing on all four paws: the diary of a kitten named Ollie* was published on Amazon Kindle in May 2021, with book two, *Landing on all four paws: Further adventures of Ollie the Cat,* published in July 2022.

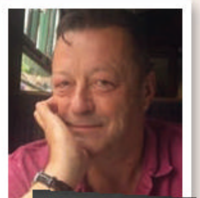
Conversations from the Bridge is the third book in the trilogy which I'm editing at the moment. This is Ollie's account from Rainbow Bridge and tells his story of how he tries to find the bridge to get back to see Mum to tell her he's sorry. His adventures are shared, as they were in the first two books, with the cats he lived with at the Lazypaws Guesthouse for Discerning Felines, before finding himself at Rainbow Bridge. It's a journey of grief, but from Ollie's point of view, as he experiences the different stages until he finally reaches acceptance.

Before the pandemic, I was carrying out research for another book on grief. Provisionally called *It's (Only) a Cat* it's about other people's perceptions to us cat lovers who have lost our pets and the way they react to us, not fully understanding the depth of our grief.

Having caught Covid in December 2020, and now living with Long Covid, all writing and editing is an enormous struggle, but I'm always happy to read about other writers' news in *Writing Magazine* and attempting the competitions, a couple of which, I've been shortlisted for.

Website: www.thedailymews.com

Fifth novel, no fluke



Fluke's Cradle
MAL FOSTER

In 2015 I inadvertently embarked on my novel-writing journey believing that my first book, *The Asylum Soul*, would be a one-off, *writes subscriber Mal Foster.*

As I was about to rest on my laurels, I then quite unexpectedly began receiving numerous requests such as, 'When is your next book out?' and getting some very generous reviews on Amazon, Goodreads and elsewhere.

It didn't take too long for me to realise that some people were actually reading and enjoying my work. I had also caught the writing bug, so inevitably, a second, third and fourth novel was always forthcoming, again with some great reviews.

Now though, I was at a crossroads wondering where my next book was coming from. In the end, following a short spell and with plenty of time to think in hospital last summer, I didn't need to look too far. Memories of my own upbringing and some of the things I witnessed in the 1970s presented me with a whole kaleidoscope of possibilities and my fifth novel, *Fluke's Cradle*, was born.

The book, set in the present day, tells the story of middle-aged Eddie Noble, who is somewhat down on his luck. Eddie had always wondered who his father was. His mother had died shortly after childbirth, and those shielding him from life's future challenges were not always forthcoming with any answers. Following a mysterious medical episode whilst searching for his mother's grave, Eddie becomes increasingly convinced he is the person he was in a previous life. He then undergoes an enforced period of regression therapy to aid his rehabilitation.

Since its publication in April 2022, the book has been very well received and has featured on local radio in Surrey. I've also hosted two very successful book-signing events in Woking where I live.

Fluke's Cradle is available in ebook, paperback and hardcover formats from Amazon.

Website : www.malfoster.co.uk

FREE RANGE writing

Odd jobs

Explore DIY delights and disasters in these home improvement-themed exercises from **Jenny Alexander**

Looking ahead, March is a busy time of year for DIY retailers, as the longer days and warmer weather mean people can get started on the home improvements they've been thinking about during the cold, dark winter months.

Personal writing is a playful way of exploring your own thoughts and feelings about different aspects of life, as well as developing your writing skills. See if this month's free-range writing gives you fresh ideas and focus on the subject of home. There's only one rule: stick to the timings!

Memoir

DIY is untrained people trying to do skilled work, so it isn't surprising that things can sometimes go horribly wrong. But mistakes are learning experiences, and this memoir piece about DIY is called, 'What I learnt.'

What I learnt, the first time I decorated a room, was that colours that look boring in the tin can look much better on the wall than the ones that pop when you lift the lid. I also learnt that painting over a bright colour with a pale one is much harder than the other way around.

When I tried to put up my own shelves and curtain rails, the holes were not deep enough, and all the shelves fell down. What I learnt was that there are different kinds of electric drills and a weak one is no match for a solid granite wall.

The day I sliced through my ankle with my strimmer I learnt not to rest it on the ground without waiting for it to stop spinning. It turned out that a moving strimmer jumps.

Write your own 'What I learnt' story about a DIY job that went wrong. If you've never attempted any DIY around the house or garden, write a piece about a family member or friend who has, and what you think they learnt.

Bear in mind that things going horribly wrong can be a comic opportunity, and something like a DIY catastrophe may also lend itself to slapstick physical comedy. Even if it isn't your first instinct, could you spin this story in a humorous way? Take twenty minutes.

Fiction

Somebody's home needs a makeover – why? Perhaps they've bought an old cottage that's very run down; perhaps they've been through a long period of depression and things have been falling apart, or perhaps they've simply changed and want a living space that fits better with their new idea of themselves.

Write some character notes, describing this person, their name, age, appearance. What do they do for work or hobbies? What do they enjoy doing in their spare time? How do they feel about Christmas? Random questions like this can quickly build a sense of a person. Ask some questions of your own.

Write some notes on their home – what needs changing? Is it a minor makeover, some cheerful yellow on the walls, some house plants and colourful throws? Or does it need a complete renovation?

How does your protagonist feel about doing this work? Perhaps they're enthusiastic and can't wait to get started, or perhaps they find the very thought of it overwhelming. Can they afford to hire skilled tradesmen, or will they try to do it themselves? Who if anyone, can they call on to help?

It's a classic ugly duckling to beautiful swan story of transformation for both this home and the person who lives in it, because a person's living space reflects their character and situation. Set your story in the spring, the perfect time for regeneration. Take twenty minutes.

Non-fiction

One way to avoid having to do your own home and garden improvements is by joining a community skill swap, where you offer something you're good at in exchange for services you might otherwise have to pay for. The modern version usually works on a time basis, so that one hour of every person's time is worth exactly the same as anyone else's.

Write a for-and-against article – what do you see as the potential advantages and pitfalls of a community skill swap? This can be basically two bullet lists with a few sentences of introduction and conclusion. For example, on the pro side, it could be a great way for neighbours to get to know each other better, but on the downside, could there be a safety issue with relative strangers coming into each other's homes? And what if you aren't happy with the quality of the work? Start by writing some notes, to organise your ideas. Take twenty minutes.

Poetry

There's a wonderful poem by Henry Normal, called *The house is not the same since you left*, in which the poet describes how his house and its contents are feeling about a change in his circumstances. You can find it online.

For your own poem, describe how you think your home feels about its general state of repair at this moment, as winter is turning into spring. What improvements would it like you to make? How do the different furnishings and fittings express those thoughts and feelings? Take twenty minutes.

Making time

All writers need to carve out time to write. **Adrian Magson** suggests ways for you to find the creative time that works best for you

The following might seem like teaching one's grandmother to suck eggs. I mean, time is important to all of us. But as this page is aimed at beginner writers, many of whom are struggling with the pressures of penning that first story, I'm sure you won't mind me going back to basics.

Finding enough time to write can be a hurdle that never really goes away. As if coming up with an intriguing plot, a red-hot story arc, a bunch of hard-to-let-go characters or even a voice readers just can't ignore isn't taxing enough, finding the time to get all that composed and down on paper can be a major problem.

You probably have a family life. You have friends. You have a day job. You have stuff that needs attending to every day just to keep life ticking over. What you probably don't have, unless you're a full-time writer, is time allocated to sit down and… write.

You could be like me – possessed of a butterfly mind; the kind that sees you gaze out of the window for inspiration and immediately spot a neighbour doing something that catches your attention; or a vehicle passing by, a pigeon on the roof across the way or anything which lifts your writing brain for a few nanoseconds away from what it's supposed to be doing.

One simple cure is to turn your desk away from the window. Remove the one big distraction in the room and your focus is more likely to get back on the job.

Even so, that leaves those everyday events that can't be dealt with so easily. You might have a helpful partner taking those on, but how often does dinner get close to finding its way into the dog because your last desperate 'Just a second!' finally struck a raw nerve?

Conflict of this sort sucks. I mean, you're a creative, fragile being; you have to write while the imaginative drive is hot and raring to go. You're trying to build something tangible out of your head (and I don't mean somewhere to put your hat). You have words and ideas milling around in there like tadpoles on crack, but how do you find the time to get down to it?

It helps if you can decide what time of day writer you are. There are early-morning writers, afternoon writers, evening writers and middle of the night writers. You might think the last one is plain weird because night is for sleeping, right? Think again; if it hasn't happened already, wait until you wake up one night with a blazing hot scene you simply have to get down on paper before you go back to sleep. But hang on, you're already bushed and the pillow is sooo comfortable…

Trust me, no matter how hard you try to get that scene embedded in your brain, come morning it will be gone like leaves in the wind. Even the odd fragments that come back over your toast and coffee won't be anywhere near as electrifying as the ones you thought of during the wee small hours.

If you're unlucky your creative best might be around mealtimes. Lunch isn't so bad... we can all do without a lunch every now and then. But evening meals can be the one time you get to interact with your other clan members whose names you might occasionally forget and instead address by the axe murderer's best friend you've just been writing about.

I suggest the mealtime period should be non-negotiable – not even for your benefit. We all need sustenance and not merely the food kind. The writing brain can be easily dulled by the focus on research, composition and editing. A session of simple conversation is a useful pressure valve, not just for you but for those around you. It will ease the clutter for a while and allow you to get back to your project refreshed.

(I admit I find it difficult to discuss the current writing project with anyone, even with my nearest and dearest – and she is my First Reader. But it's enormously encouraging to know she's interested enough to ask how it's going, even if not talking about it in detail.)

It's very easy to get stuck into writing because you think you must. Your time is precious, so keep at it. You think the more you do the more you'll accomplish. True to a point. But you have to know when to let go, otherwise all your efforts can be counter-productive.

There's another benefit to agreeing or planning your writing time. The more regularly you can set the time – and stick to it – the more likely your writing will be productive instead of becoming fractured by a rush of indecision. You should also set yourself some goals beforehand as to what you want to accomplish during your time at the keyboard. This kind of basic planning is never wasted.

Wanting your writing time can appear to others as a form of selfishness. I admit it is. Whether competing with a day job or running a family life, you need to pursue this passion because it simply won't let go. Have an idea and it must be put down on paper.

But it needs organising, not just for your benefit but for those around you. Put simply, the more settled you are about your writing times, the more relaxed you will be when it comes to doing what you love most.

TOP TIPS

- Organise your time.
- Plan what you want to achieve in each writing session.
- Don't forget the people in your life!
- A relaxed writer is a successful one.

Your writing critiqued

Brenda Pieper-Callan is a qualified registered nurse and midwife. She is an avid letter writer as a result of her passion for writing, and has published work-related articles. In 2015 she undertook writing courses at the Irish Writers Centre, Dublin and has remained a very motivated member of a writing group that formed there. *The Purple Scarf* is her first novel.

James McCreet applies his forensic micro-critique to the beginning of a reader's manuscript

Our empty cups signalled that it was time to move.[1] Interludes like this[2] passed too quickly. Seated across from me,[3] Eva ran her finger around the chocolate froth on the rim of her cup.[4] She oozed pleasure[5] as she smacked[6] her violet-tinged[7] lips together.[8]

"Will you pay our bill?" I asked.[9] She scrunched up the notes and coins I placed in front of her.[10]

"Will do." she replied[11] tracing the espuma that had long since dried.[12] Ever since we had attended the tea and coffee fair we considered ourselves connoisseurs of these drinks.[13]

Easing myself from the window seat [14] I made my way[15] to the ladies'. Once inside,[16] I took a moment[17] to look at my reflection in the mirror. I leaned closer and dabbed the moist patch on my cheek. I didn't want Eva to see that I was upset again.[18] Since Josh left, I had become more and more aware of my new reality.[19] And he wasn't coming back. Not ever.[20] Much as I loved days out with Eva,[21] Josh's absence reminded me of the time when we were a family. I was so happy then, just the three of us together.[22]

Applying a slick of lipstick,[23] a memory came to me of a boy at primary school who once told me that I had 'kissy lips'. He was right I thought,[24] as I followed the Cupid's bow. He must have seen something then.[25] Stepping back[26] I caught my full reflection and smoothed my hand down over my chest as if moving the bridled energy wedged inside me.[27] Smacking my lips together[28] I decided that I looked good.[29] I spritzed a little perfume[30] and stood under the fine mist[31] before making my way[32] down the spiral staircase[33] to the café, feeling somewhat lighter with every step,[34] my tension released in that small, private, tearful moment.[35]

1 It's clear what you mean, but it's imprecise. The cups don't do anything. In a scene with two people, the emphasis begins on the crockery.

2 Like what? And how is it an interlude? An interlude between what other things? There's not much information to grasp so far. The reader needs more to get hold of at the start of a story.

3 The choice to begin a sentence with a subordinate clause should always be carefully considered. This syntax prioritises Eva's location over her action. Maybe it's crucial to know exactly where she is, but equally we could probably infer as much if the narrator can see her and is describing her.

4 This is a beautiful sentence: visual and evocative while also telling us something about the character. We could probably have an additional adjective describing the state of the froth, which is probably now drying or deflated. A purely pedantic point: I wonder if the froth is only on the rim or also on the inside of the cup? Where does a rim end and the inside begin?

5 This cliché is disappointing after the last sentence. Yes, we all know the phrase, but in no actual sense does Eva ooze anything unless she has a digestive complaint. What's a better formulation? Did she 'exude' pleasure? And what did this oozing look like in her expression, her body language?

6 Another cliché. Did she actually make a noise with her lips like a horse? I guess it's possible, but it reduces her pleasure to a generic visual parody.

7 The two clichés make me wonder if this is another broad-stroke description. Are her lips very faintly marked with violet (because the drinking has worn off her lipstick, say) or is 'tinged' being used here simply to mean 'coloured?'

8 To smack one's lips is already to put them together so this is redundant.

9 If there's a question mark, we don't need the verb 'asked'. Just use 'said' to avoid the repetition. It's interesting that the narrator is asking Eva to pay. It gives an insight into their relationship (perhaps).

10 Ah, but the narrator is giving Eva the money. A mild confusion in narrative order. I can see that the notes were scrunched, but the coins?

11 Should be a comma rather than a full stop after 'do'. As in point 9, we don't need 'replied' because this is clearly a reply.

12 'Espuma' is a great word. It's Spanish, but so what? The problem is that Eva was running her finger though it barely a second ago but now it's 'long since dried' so what

TAP HERE
To read James McCreet's rewrite

If you would like to submit an extract of your work in progress, send it by email, with synopsis and a brief biog, to: **tjackson@warnersgroup.co.uk**

was she doing previously?

13 A slight non sequitur. Is tracing the foam somehow the sign of an expert? Isn't it quite common? Have we so far witnessed two connoisseurs in action?

14 Similar point to 2. The subordinate clause places more emphasis on the getting up than going to the ladies. There should be a comma after 'seat'.

15 A meaningless phrase. A person could make their way somewhere by hopping or by scooter or dribbling a football. Either specify an exact verb or avoid the unnecessary focus and just say 'went'.

16 Another subordinate clause and also redundant. The reader can infer that she's inside having just been told she's on her way there.

17 Clearly more than a 'moment' if she leans in to examine a specific detail. Avoid formulaic phrases that don't make sense.

18 The moist patch wasn't there when she left the table? Has she cried on the way to the ladies'?

19 Vague. The character may know what this 'new reality' is, but the reader doesn't. Single? Mourning? Seriously injured?

20 Nice staccato emphasis.

21 Another subordinate clause, which can make sentences overly formal or convoluted.

22 A bit too much 'telling' going on here. It's sufficient for the reader to know the character is upset. We don't necessarily need a download of the whole context so soon. It can come gradually. Telling shows the author's hand too obviously.

23 Another subordinate clause. Just write: *I applied a slick of lipstick and remembered . . .*

24 'I thought' is redundant because all of this is her thoughts.

25 Meaning what? That she had the same lips back then? That he could foresee the future?

26 Subordinate clause. It's not necessary to record every movement. If you say, 'I looked at my full reflection', the stepping back is implicit.

27 A very unwieldy mixed metaphor! The smoothing movement is not eradicating the energy but merely moving it – to where? The intestines? If the energy is bridled, then it is already under control and doesn't need smoothing. Moreover, a bridle is a mouthpiece and we're talking about the chest. It doesn't work as an expression of her tension.

28 More lip smacking (and subordinate clauses – without a comma)? This should really be a new paragraph.

29 We've already heard she likes her lips. Is this repetition?

30 A good example here of not having to explain that the perfume is from her bag.

31 Makes it sound like there's an unholy amount of perfume descending from the ceiling.

32 More way-making.

33 There was no mention of a spiral staircase when she went to the toilet. Why mention it now?

34 'Feeling lighter' is a cliché that doesn't really express any complexity of feeling.

35 I like the rhythm of the commas here, but what we witnessed in the bathroom was too generic to mean much. It seems this sentence is required to underline what wasn't adequately expressed before.

In summary

The main issue is the imprecise language. Too much reliance on generic phrases and cliché means that the writing becomes 'writing' – a rough sketch in which the words get in the way of the thing being expressed. We should feel for the character and her situation, but it could be anyone. It needs to be distinctive. It needs to feel real.

The subordinate clauses are another thing to note. They are an unconscious tic for many writers, but you need to stop and think how you are ordering the information in your sentence. Where is the focus? What comes first? What is important? How do clauses affect the rhythm and flow of the lines? Clause order shouldn't be random or accidental.

Another quite common error is to (over)describe insignificant actions. Does it matter how somebody gets to the bathroom or which leg they're standing on as they brush their teeth? If it is important, make it the focus. If not, trust in the reader's sense of what is implied. If someone rings the doorbell, is it crucial to explain that the door is opened before the conversation begins with the postman?

There are some nice touches in the piece. We need more of those and less of the generic, broad-stroke stuff. For prose to really engage a reader, it has to be specific and generate genuine impressions or feelings.

Deep cleaning

First impressions count, particularly when you're submitting to agents and publishers. **Margaret James** offers top tips on spring cleaning your manuscript for submission.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

I can't remember who coined that particular aphorism. But these days, in the hugely competitive worlds of commercial and independent publishing, it's surely a truth that is universally acknowledged, and we all know who originally wrote that.

So now, open up a piece of writing that you honestly feel is the best you can make it, and should therefore be ready for submission to literary agents and/or publishers, or uploading as an independently-published story.

Before you take any of those important steps, however, there's something else you should do: spring clean the actual document until it shines.

As a reader and judge for several literary competitions, I always try to discount the physical appearance of an entry or submission. But I can assure anyone submitting to competition organisers, literary agents, publishers, or even to beta-readers who are personal friends, that a well-presented piece of work gets the reader on the author's side from the start.

Presentation and formatting

Nowadays, you'll almost certainly be submitting your work electronically. As far as I'm concerned, this development is more than welcome. My days of reading tattered, grubby, faintly-printed, typewritten or even handwritten hard copy covered in coffee stains (at least, I always hoped they were coffee stains) and featuring dozens of messy correction-fluid alterations, are thankfully long gone.

But you can still give your work the edge by making sure you are consistent with your choice and size of font, rather than change from twelve point Times Roman to ten point Arial half way through a typescript, or even half way down a page, for no reason at all.

Times Roman, Arial and similarly clear, clean-looking fonts such as Bookman, Franklin, Calibri or Baskerville are acceptable to most readers. But don't use any of the more elaborate or fancy fonts, such as those which mimic handwriting, because these are distracting and draw too much attention to themselves.

Try to resist the temptation to overuse your bold, underline and italic options.

As for exclamation marks – be stingy with these as well, because too many will suggest your characters are constantly proclaiming or shouting at each other.

Some published commercial fiction is very idiosyncratically presented. A complete (or almost complete) absence of punctuation, for instance, does have some degree of literary validation, as this list of leading writers who ignored the basic rules of punctuation shows: **https://writ.rs/punctuation**. Once the reader has accepted that this absence is deliberate, the reading experience is usually straightforward. But, if you are trying to impress a stranger, maybe don't overdo this kind of personalisation of your text because it might suggest you don't actually know how to use commas or apostrophes, rather than that you have made a conscious style decision in the hope your writing will stand out.

Make your work look attractive on the page with basic tools available to you, such as centring your chapter headings, and using tabs to indent your paragraphs, which should never be indented merely by tapping the space bar.

Set your margins and then keep them consistent.

As for dialogue – some commercially-published novelists always use conventional formatting, whereas others, such as Bernadine Evaristo in her bestseller *Girl, Woman, Other,* sometimes don't. So make a decision about formatting your own dialogue, and then be consistent. Just bear in mind that although quotation marks aren't obligatory, failing to use them might make it difficult for your reader to work out who is saying what.

Grammar

Narrative, as opposed to dialogue, should usually be grammatically correct, unless there is a good reason for it to be otherwise: for example, in a novel written entirely in the first person in a character's own special way.

I've read published novels and competition entries written almost entirely in dialect, which usually means both the dialogue and the narrative in these are unconventional. Mostly, this is no problem. The reader gets used to it, starts hearing the characters' voices, and stops noticing things like *he don't care what I does*.

But, if you are writing in dialogue, or reproducing a specific accent or style of speaking, remember that too many elisions can be very annoying and also look horrible on the page.

Faithfully-reproduced Cockney dialogue is especially prone to elisions: *'Enry an' 'er ain't ever gon' let 'im 'ave it*, for instance, might sound authentic, but could also make your pages look as if spiders with sooty feet have run races across them. So always elide judiciously.

Spelling

This ought to be conventional unless you are deliberately writing in dialect, or faithfully reproducing a character's accent.

Try not to mix and match American and British English spellings. Stick to the US *behavior* (or UK *behaviour*), US *center* (or UK *centre*), US *realize* (or UK *realise*) throughout.

Proofing

Proofing our own writing is very tedious and headache-inducing, but it has to be done, even by professional authors. I used to get my teenage children to proof my work. I paid them a set fee for every mistake they found, which motivated them enormously.

NOW TRY THIS

- I'm aware that the advice above might look prescriptive, or even bossy, and of course authors can write fiction in any way they choose. But don't give a first reader or competition organiser any reason to think you are ignorant when it comes to traditional good practice. This is why consistency is key, because consistency should ensure it's obvious that you know what you are doing.
- It's beyond the scope of this feature to cover everything you need to know about presenting your work, but *New Hart's Rules* (Oxford University Press) – otherwise known as the author's and editor's Bible – will always put you right, and should be on every author's actual or virtual bookshelf.

Five quick questions 5

SNIFF THEM OUT, BROWNLOW!
New! From bestselling author Judy Upton
JUDY UPTON
HE ALWAYS FOLLOWS HIS NOSE
JUDY UPTON
BRIGHTON PIER
OUT of the FRYING PAN
How many artists does it take to solve a kidnapping?

with Judy Upton

When and where did your journey as an author begin?
I started writing fiction as a teenager, but it was entering my first stage play *Ashes and Sand* for the George Devine Award, and winning it, that really set me on my way. The Royal Court staged the play, and further opportunities in theatre, radio and film followed.

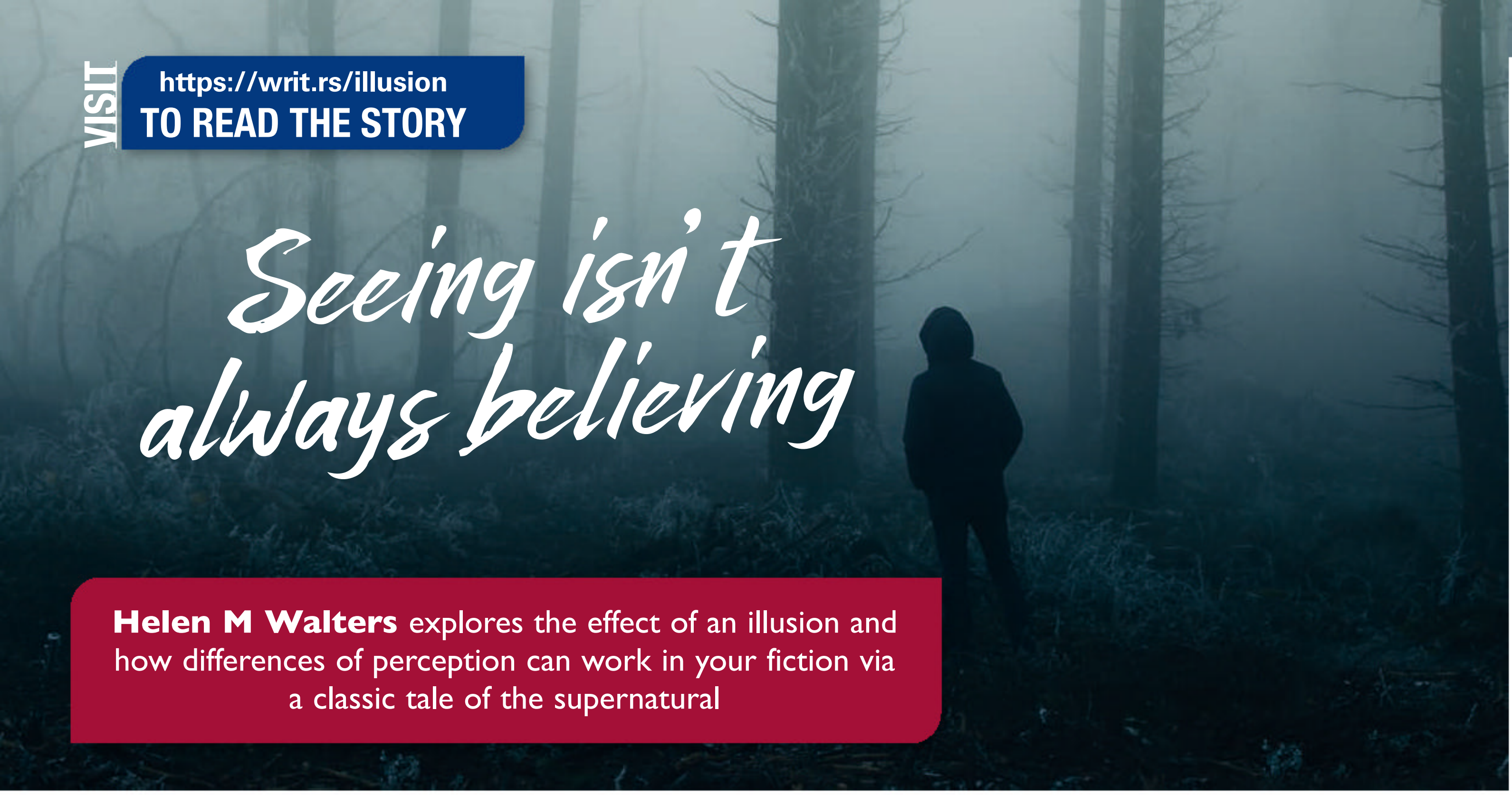
In 2020, during the first lockdown, I returned to my first novel *Out of the Frying Pan* and finished it. I sent it to Hobart Books, a publisher I'd seen featured in *Writing Magazine*, and they published it in 2021. In October 2022 they published the follow up *Sniff Them Out, Brownlow!* a cosy crime mystery about a pet detective and her dog.

What is (or has been) your proudest moment as a writer?
Seeing my first mystery novel *Out of the Frying Pan* on the Cracking Crime shelf in my local library, where my family took me to borrow books from the age of three. Also seeing my second novel *What Maisie Didn't Know* published in hardback by Wrecking Ball Press in 2021, and stocked in their Hull bookshop.

Who or what is your greatest inspiration?
David Storey. As a teenager I loved his novels and plays of working class life. I was stunned when I realised he'd been instrumental in my winning the George Devine Award for my first play. He also made me realise it was possible to be both a playwright and novelist.

What is coming up next for you, fiction-wise?
My novel *Sniff Them Out, Brownlow!* involves a pet detective searching for stolen dogs, so it seemed natural that my second mystery about the same characters should feature missing cats. *Brownlow Checks In* opens at a luxury cattery for pampered felines.

What is your top tip for writers still on the journey towards publication?
Read magazines like this one and study websites featuring publishing industry news, as well as publishers' own websites and social media. There are many independent publishers that are directly approachable, sometimes via an open submissions window for a short space of time. Carefully check what they are looking for and whether your book might be a match their requirements.



VISIT https://writ.rs/illusion TO READ THE STORY

Seeing isn't always believing

Helen M Walters explores the effect of an illusion and how differences of perception can work in your fiction via a classic tale of the supernatural

This month's story combines horror, supernatural and crime elements in a compelling tale where things may not be what they seem. *Was It An Illusion?* (subtitled *A Parson's Story*) by Amelia B Edwards follows an Inspector of Schools as he visits a remote village and experiences some strange events. As always, you will benefit most from this masterclass if you read the story for yourself: **https://writ.rs/illusion**.

The narrative falls into three main sections, with a fourth, smaller, section at the end. Each is distinct and adds something different to the story. We are going to look at each section in turn and consider what it tells us, and how it works with the other sections to form the structure of the story.

Usually when I'm teaching short story writing, I advise people not to spend too much time setting the scene. Often it is best to dive into the action rather than waste words on preliminary build up. But, in this story, we do have three paragraphs of 'scene setting' before the action gets started in the fourth paragraph. Why has the author chosen to do this?

I think there a few good reasons for it. Firstly, note how the story starts with the narrator, Frazer, referring to 'facts' and to things that happened to him personally. Frazer then goes on to establish his credentials. He is a School Inspector, and therefore a trusted member of the community. He is experienced, and in his previous district had become accustomed to mixing with various clergy and gentry. All this is designed to give an air of credibility to what is to come next. Notice also the foreshadowing of the possibility of adventure.

The action of the story commences in the fourth paragraph when the narrator arrives in the remote hamlet of Pit End. This heralds the next section of the story, which recounts the perplexing events that happen while Frazer is carrying out his school inspecting duties. This is the section of the story in which we, as readers, will experience illusions along with him.

The author uses the visual disturbances of both fog and twilight to introduce the first possibly illusory events. Firstly, Frazer, who has lost his bearings, sees a limping man coming towards him out of the fog. Note how the ambiguity of the situation is carefully seeded in the wording of this passage: the reference to not encountering a 'living soul'; the claim to 'almost believe' the man had not seen him; the fact he could have 'taken his oath' he had not passed the younger man who he subsequently sees; the question he asks himself as to whether he was dreaming. Throughout the passage we get a rising sense of uncertainty.

This is built on in subsequent paragraphs. Look out for these moments.

Distracted by news that the local squire is a previous acquaintance, Frazer almost forgets the encounter with the limping man and the boy. Frazer is puzzled on meeting the schoolmaster because he recognises his face and doesn't know where from until he spots his limp and remembers. The schoolmaster denies he had even been out the previous afternoon when Frazer is convinced he saw him. Frazer believes he sees the shadow of a third person on the ground as he talks to the schoolmaster, who denies seeing it and insists it must have been an illusion. Frazer thinks he sees a boy with a fishing rod crossing his path, just before the body of a boy is found in the water, whilst his old friend Wolstenholme fails to see him. All these differences of perception add to the mystery of the story, and various explanations are offered for them from seeing illusions to dreaming.

So, what should the reader conclude is real, in this story, and what can be judged to be illusory? The penultimate section of the story purports to have the answers. At this point Frazer surrenders responsibility for telling the tale to Wolstenholme.

Note that this section is, therefore, in a different point of view and also is in the epistolary style. Wolstenholme is writing to Frazer to tell him what actually happened, as opposed to what he might think happened. We find out through the letter that the body found in the water is that of Skelton's son and that he appears to have been murdered. We further discover, in a series of postscripts, that Skelton has taken his own life before being able to be brought to trial for the murder of his son.

Note the formal language in this section, which serves to give it an authoritative feel. 'Facts' came out in the coroner's inquest. Witnesses came forward to 'prove' and 'independently testify' to various information. The case will be tried at the spring assizes, and so on.

Of course, this does not explain the 'illusions' experienced by Frazer in the course of the story. Are we, as readers, meant to accept those as being supernatural? And if so, what exact nature or category of the supernatural are they? When Frazer encounters the limping man and the young boy in the fog, is he crossing paths with two ghosts? Skelton isn't actually dead at this point, but maybe he is a 'fetch' or living ghost. Perhaps Frazer is experiencing a 'residual haunting' where a past event, possibly the night of the murder, is being replayed. Or maybe, Frazer was simply mistaken due to the poor visibility conditions, or has an over-active imagination.

The final section, short as it is, sums up the dilemma. Should Frazer accept that the things he thought he saw were real or – was it an illusion?

Creating an illusion

Obviously when we write short stories, we are always creating an illusion. That is in the nature of fiction. We are using words to create something that is not already in existence. But let's look at some ways in which we can create further illusions within that overall illusion.

As we've seen in this month's story, supernatural happenings can add an additional layer of intrigue to your stories. But what other techniques can we use to add extra layers of illusion?

Unreliable narrators and twists

Sometimes we want to create illusions to mislead our readers about what is happening in a story.

Unreliable narrators are one way to do this. They give us their own interpretation of events, but it may not be the whole story, or even the correct story. Unreliable narration can be either deliberate or accidental. Deliberate unreliable narrators are setting out to deceive because they have something to hide. Perhaps they have committed a crime or are keeping some other dark secret. But other narrators are unreliable for reasons beyond their control. Perhaps they are a child who doesn't have the full comprehension of an adult. Or they could be someone who has found themselves in a culture other than their own, where they don't understand the language, and they have no idea what is going on.

In twist stories, we as writers, keep information back from the reader. It might be about the nature of our main character. Perhaps they are male and we want the reader to think they are female, or they are old and we want the reader to think they are young. These illusions are usually revealed as close as possible to the end of the story and need to leave the reader feeling they've been treated fairly and not cheated. We can withhold information and present information in a misleading way, but we cannot lie.

Both these techniques involve the writer using illusion to present things to the reader in a particular way in order to play with their perceptions then revealing the truth at the most impactful moment.

Dreams and distractions

While stories that end with the disclosure that 'it was all a dream' tend to be frowned on and considered something of a cop-out, that doesn't mean that we can't use the illusion of a dream sequence to enhance a story.

Does your character have anxiety dreams? What are they about? Dreams rarely exactly reflect real life. If your character is anxious about financial problems, for example, that may manifest itself in a dream about being lost or late for an important event.

Or what about those moments when your character is unable to sleep for the thoughts going through their head? What do they worry about at 4am? Again, these may not be the same as the things they worry about in their fully waking hours.

What your character daydreams about can be revealing as well. Do they have big plans for the future? Or are they the sort of person who goes backwards and forwards over previous events rewriting them in their head to give them a better outcome? Maybe their daydreams are the only things that give them a sense of control over their actual life.

Whatever illusions or delusions your character is living with, they will impact on how that character behaves.

Have a go at these ways of using illusion in your stories:

- Your character thinks they have seen their doppelganger. What happens next?
- Write a story in which the narrator is suffering memory loss.
- Your character wakes up from an anxiety dream. What is it about and what bearing does it have on what they're really anxious about?
- Write a twist story in which your main character thinks they've witnessed a crime that turns out to be nothing of the sort.

Your character is sunbathing by a swimming pool with a cocktail. What are they daydreaming about?

Some stories might benefit from a dream, and others might be made more dramatic by a nightmare. Try using the art of illusion to create a more complex picture in your stories and see what a difference it can make.

What makes you unique?

Raise your chances of your children's writing being discovered by finding, and developing your writer USP, with advice from **Amy Sparkes**

The world of children's publishing is hugely competitive. With so many stories landing on publishers' and agents' desks, how can your story stand out? It's true that brilliant concepts, intriguing characters, tight plots and mesmerising writing obviously play a massive part... but... there are numerous writers who can also do all these things. What else can you do to stand out? One thing which really helps is to find your USP.

Your Unique Selling Point (USP) is exactly what it says on the tin – something which is unique to you or your idea, and which can help sell it. 'Selling' can seem a harsh and heartless word which strips away the hours of love and soul and creativity we writers pour into our projects, but at the end of the day, your story is a product to be sold and make money. And often you, as an author, are sold as a brand. If this doesn't sound very appealing to you, it might be the world of traditional publishing is not for you!

USPs can often be found for individual stories or concepts – working out what is different about your particular story helps put your book in a stronger position. And although book-USP and writer-USP are often related, the book USP is different from the writer USP.

Before you can showcase your writer USP to editors, publishers or agents, you need to understand what it is yourself. Here are some tips.

Consider experience

When you're trying to find your author USP, look at the life experience you have. Is there something in your own personal experience that you can bring to storytelling? Perhaps an unusual upbringing or intriguing occupation? Why do you see the world the way you see it? What has shaped your storytelling, and how can you utilise that both in the actual writing itself and in the way you present yourself as a writer? There may be many areas which overlap with other writers, which is to be expected, but are there any areas which are less common or more unusual, that other writers are less likely to fill?

It is important to note, however, that the author's choice should come first. If you have created a story with an Own Voices character but you prefer not to draw attention to the fact that it is Own Voices, that should be absolutely fine. You should never feel under pressure to disclose personal information about yourself if you're not comfortable with it.

Some may argue that it helps young readers if they know that the author has overcome some personal adversity or disadvantage, reflected in the story. And that sometimes may be the case; however, it should not be done at personal cost to the author. For some writers, due to personal reasons which have a right to stay personal, they prefer not to disclose information. Writers have a tough enough time as it is without adding more pressure!

It's also worth mentioning that even if you are a writer who could write a story with an Own Voices character (e.g. a story about a character living with disabilities, or from a certain background, with certain experiences, etc.) it doesn't mean you have to only write these stories. Just because the publishing industry is keen to find more Own Voices stories, it doesn't mean you should only explore these avenues if actually you would like to try different things creatively.

Understand yourself

The more you understand yourself as a person, the more you will understand yourself as a writer. And the more you understand both of these things, the stronger your work will probably be. Your USP will also feel much clearer, and less generic as we are all individuals. Think about who you are as a person and what your personality is like. Look to see if it is reflected in your writing. Do you think someone could read your writing and guess what your personality was like?

It's also worth noting that in the same way that there are different parts of your personality, so there may be different parts of voice and different USPs. For example, I'm an energetic person, and a lot of the humour in my writing feels quite energetic. And yet, I'm also a poet and keen photographer who loves being still (for short periods of time!) and noticing the small details. Those two things may seem rather irreconcilable, yet they are both parts of me. And what it does create when I embrace these different parts of my personality is energetic but finely-tuned comedy: the devil's in the detail.

As well as understanding your personality and how that can link to your USP, it's important to be in tune with those particular things that 'make you tick' – those areas which spark your interest. Think about your particular passions – are there some you feel compelled to tell stories about? Are there likely to be recurring themes in your work that you will be known for as a writer?

It is also helpful to consider your strengths and weaknesses. If you're aware of the things you do well as a writer, you can build on your strengths and help to develop your USP.

If there aren't many unique things you can find in your interest or abilities, how about a strong or interesting combination of certain things? For example, I'm known as quite an energetic person with a vivid imagination and a love of spontaneity and comedy. Individually, those qualities aren't that unique. For example, many writers have vivid imaginations. Many can write funny fiction. But combining your personal qualities in your writing can make it more powerful and create a strong voice and USP – so, in my case, energetic, imaginative, unpredictable, funny writing. As brilliant book reviewer Chris Soul (**www.chrissoul.co.uk**) neatly summed up when reviewing my latest book, *The Bookshop At The Back Of Beyond*, 'By now, I've come to expect the unexpected with Amy Sparkes' wonderfully engaging writing and explosive imagination.' There's the USP. (Thank you, Chris!).

How about you? If someone was reviewing your books, what do you think they would pick up on? What would be the common things people would say about it?

Push your voice

Finding your voice is a difficult one. It can take a long time to feel confident in your storytelling and writing abilities but the more you write and the more you practice, the more your voice will shine.

You probably have a whole list of authors who inspire you and a sense of where your books might sit on a shelf. But there's a fine line between inspiration and imitation. It can be surprisingly easy to find ourselves unintentionally imitating the writing of those we admire. Yet it is stepping away from this and finding your own voice which will help you understand your USP as a writer.

Find your writer USP quick quiz

- Who are you?
- What is your personality like?
- Do you have any unusual background/experience?
- Do you have any specialist knowledge or skills?
- What can you offer readers?
- Are there any recurring themes in your work?
- What things 'make you tick'?
- What are your strengths as a writer?
- How would you describe your writing style? (Can include different areas of your voice).
- Why do you think an agent would want you on their books? What can you offer them that they don't already have?

Prose and cons

Using methods people use to send messages in fiction has a long tradition, but how can it work in your horror, fantasy and sci-fi stories? **Alex Davis** looks at epistolary storytelling in genre fiction.

You may or may not have come across the term epistolary storytelling, but I'd say it's good odds you've encountered it in either your reading or writing. If you've ever been through a book or a short story and found letters, emails, text messages or quotes and pages from books that only exist within a fictional setting, you've already seen it in action.

The terms applies to fiction that – usually in combination with traditional prose – uses alternative methods to get its plot over that also exist within the fictional world. So an author foreword or afterword isn't an example of epistolary storytelling, though interesting in their own right. But when a character reads that letter, or you show the email a protagonist is sending to someone else, or you show the text that just arrived on your lead's phone, all of those are very much relevant examples. And there are many more besides, of course – which we'll explore in the context of genre fiction today, where I feel this format of telling a tale has a particular relevance.

Epistolatory storytelling in horror: Breaking down barriers of disbelief

If you're anything like me, there are a few horror books and movies that have kept you awake at night. But, as I was reflecting before writing this piece, I came to realise that many of mine were those that used this epistolary approach, moving away from prose towards things that felt more real-world. I reference it numerous times, but Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a book full to the brim with it – and all the more terrifying for it.

The reason epistolary storytelling is so good for horror is that it allows you to break away from the reader as an observer – you can still enjoy and of course be scared by horror in traditional prose, but when we introduce other elements we bring an extra edge of reality into things, and the sense that we are watching a nightmare unfold from a safe remove is whittled away. If we think logically we know it can't be real, but that's not always easy to do. So characters sending messages to one another, writing entries in diaries about their awful experiences or even seeing press releases and news reports relating to the unfolding horror can be highly effective.

Horror has also used the idea of the cursed book or the cursed film to great effect, and you can easily argue this is a further form of epistolary storytelling, using the trappings of the genre to draw the reader closer in uncomfortable ways. The movie *Antrum* and Brian Kirk's book *Will Haunt You* provide two interesting examples of this in action. And if you're seeking out a book told almost entirely in an epistolary style, then the anonymous *Slenderman* novel does just this – being a mix of audio transcriptions, online messages, news reports and more, but precious little prose as we may know it.

I would say in closing that while this device can be highly effective in frightening a reader, it also has scope to be overdone – be wary not to make the story simply too hard to follow with all your alternative methods of writing. And if you want to develop that sense of reality – or the feeling it could be real – then you need to make sure the methods you use are accurately written. For examples, news reports and press releases have a distinctive writing style that needs to fit what a reader might be used to in the wider world. Read a few and look at some advice on how to write them well if you're not sure!

Epistolary storytelling in fantasy: In with the old

Fantasy is a genre that largely tends to look to the past for its inspiration, with many of its famous settings and worlds broadly based upon a certain historical period – though usually with some fantastical additions! This can mean that in many cases the epistolary methods you have at your fingertips are limited – but that's not to say they don't have their uses. And for those you may want to look back to history itself.

While in the modern world methods of communication are plentiful, and often instantaneous, this certainly wasn't always the case – and it's here the possibilities can open up. Letters delivered by messenger or even by bird were commonplace, and the contents of these missives could be pivotal to the story – both in the case of them being delivered or equally in not reaching their destination. It could be pivotal information to swing the tide of a battle, a warning of treachery about to be unveiled or professions of a hidden lover – all can have a significant role in moving the plot on. And of course there remains scope for written diary entries to boot, which can help to deepen character and provide another mechanism to give valuable information to both readers and protagonist (or antagonists) alike.

The x-factor here is the use of magic within your story, and how it works in your world. Of course it's not an absolute essential for any fantasy tale, but it does often feature and might give more routes for some epistolary storytelling. Could there be telepathy, or clues and information left that is invisible to those who are unable to use magic? Could magical messages even be given on a grander scale – written in the sky, across a field, on the side of a mountain? If it works within the system you have set up, and the location of your story, then literally anything is possible.

Epistolary storytelling in science fiction: And in with the new

If you think the modern world offers plenty of opportunities for epistolary storytelling within your work… well, you are right. But just think of the possibilities that might open up in the next ten or twenty years, let alone what might be achievable in a hundred or a thousand years. And this is where much of the fun of science-fiction can be – attempting to gaze into your 'crystal ball' and speculate what might be next.

Put simply, the scope for epistolary storytelling in SF is almost infinite. You want instantaneous brain to brain messaging? You got it! Information tablets you swallow to reveal the contents? Go for it! Hidden messages spread across the internet, or whatever succeeds the internet? It's all possible! You can use the epistolary techniques as a great way to drive home the importance and functionality of the technology in the setting, and even employ it to further draw out both the benefits and the drawbacks of its existence.

But to give a slight note of warning – just because anything is possible in a world free of the limitations of 2022, doesn't mean that everything should happen just for the fun of it. Like fantasy, believable worldbuilding is important. Immersing the reader in a setting is a pivotal part of what keeps the reader invested and maintains their suspension of disbelief throughout. If you suddenly throw in a method of epistolary storytelling out of nowhere without setting it up, you risk jolting that suspension of disbelief and even worse, potentially entering deux ex machina territory – which you want to avoid in any genre if you can. If you want to use it, try and bake it into the world in some way that feels really essential to the story rather than making it a throwaway moment to solve an unforeseen story issue.

Epistolary storytelling is not a new technique at all, and is something you can track back to books that far predate genre discussion or the definitions and distinctions of genres being drawn. To this day you will find it in literary fiction, in romance, in crime… and of course across plenty of fantastical fiction too, where I think its use has many interesting applications.

First and foremost, what ties fantasy, SF and horror together is that use of the 'unreal' – those elements that don't exist in the world as we know it, or at least whose existence is a subject of hearty debate (ghosts being one particular instance of that). As such, unlike other genres, there is a need to persuade our reader that what they are reading is real or at the very least could be believed to be real. And this is where epistolary storytelling can really become valuable – its use gives a story extra depth, adds to a world and setting, and can help bridge that gap of disbelief and distance that can open up between a reader and a story.

But that's not to say that it comes without its risks. To come back to my old favourite *House of Leaves*, I know I'm one of a crew of fervent advocates. But the pure volume of epistolary storytelling in it has proved off-putting to many, and despite my love of it I do understand that viewpoint. It might be something that you want to limit to occasional uses, deploying it sporadically to allow for maximum surprise and maximum effect, or keep yourself to one approach away from old-school prose rather than calling upon four or five different methods.

But before you launch into it, I have one more important question to ask you – why do it at all? Many a staggeringly good story has been told without employing epistolary techniques, so it's important to really look yourself in the eye and ask why you are doing it. If you can give an answer as to how it improves and strengthens the story, or benefits the reading experience, then great. But if your honest response is that you're doing it because it'll help you stand out, or is that it just looks awfully clever, then neither of those really qualify as reasons. It can add plenty in the right story – but not every story is right for it.

TABAC
ORIGINAL
AFTER SHAVE
LOTION
APRES RASAGE
powder
antifungal

A scent of the past

Alison Chisholm explores a poem that conveys the way objects don't merely hold memories, but evoke life in times that have passed

OLD-SCHOOL

Empty now,
the bottle of old-school aftershave
has survived each lunging cull
and lives at the back of the cabinet
beneath the bathroom sink.
Alongside is a horse-hair brush
with a base of winter-chapped red
like a tiny buoy hauled ashore
from a childhood sea.
A bowl, too, of medicated soap,
Measham's or Daunt's,
scarped and abraded
to an old-gold moon
like the broached lid
of a miniature Party Four.

They share a quiet
such as is found beneath leaves
when light falls back
and the climb of the earliest owl
threads thicket to star. History too –
days long gone under the main
when Fridays after mealtime
meant ritual, sluiced armpits,
faces confected brow to jaw
in mirrors angled to catch
each nip of skin and, just behind,
a bathroom wall's posy of oceanic fronds.

Hope was there as well,
winking at the mirror's edge,
promising low murmurs
at a table where the other lads weren't,
a coat gallantly unfolded
for slim arms to snug on,
a homeward walk to a gate
with parental watchfulness
globed in an outside light –
promising arrangements for the next time
if luck played nice,
then all the times after,
tiny steps through the big who-knows
as if it were a book of shapes
that reserves the right to pick its own colours –
high-day white, blaring yellow,
maybe at the end the deep gentle orange
of all to be looked back on
in modest happiness, feasible calm.

Party Four: a large can of Watneys Bitter beer,
first launched in 1964.

New poems come at us from all directions. They may arrive in a flash or at a crawl, and sometimes we don't know where they originated. One source that crops up frequently is inspiration from the poems we read. *Old-school*, however, was inspired by a poem its author had written.

Michael W. Thomas, a poet and prose writer from Stourport-on-Severn, Worcestershire, found that a poem from his 2014 collection, *Come to Pass*, provided him with a train of thought that culminated in *Old-school*. His poem *In Their Quiet* contained the lines:

In the first of the morning
when the hour still holds its rose
there's nothing more lovely
than staring at things in their quiet

Reflecting on these lines prompted thoughts of things that are out of sight, which led to the idea of an old, empty aftershave bottle tucked away in a cabinet under the bathroom sink. Michael says 'The aftershave bottle is simply, quietly what it is. Practically, it is useless now but it isn't hurting the space that it takes up. And in my mind's eye it was joined by other forgotten objects: the shaving brush and the old (almost-concrete?) medicated soap (I invented the names 'Measham's or Daunt's': they seemed to have that barber-shop, wet-shave ring).'

The poem could have finished at the end of the first stanza, but the ending with its reference to the *Party Four* insisted a different plan. The large beer can was the party drink of choice with young people from the mid 1960s, trendy and affordable. It took Michael's memories back, and prompted him to return to the idea of the aftershave and carry it back in time to when it had been an essential piece of equipment for the young man preparing to go out with his pals.

There's a natural movement in the life of the aftershave, with the night out with the boys *edging to a table where the other lads weren't*, and the rituals of courtship, the doorstep kiss, and, with increasing speed, the life together that developed from those early meetings. So the empty bottle of *old-school aftershave* becomes a symbol of the transition from youth through time, a fixed point in the churning ocean of maturing and aging, a talisman for yesterday's boy and today's adult.

From the start, there is a precision of description that places the images in sharp focus. We can see the shaving brush with its *base of winter-chapped red*, and the simile that follows, *like a tiny buoy hauled ashore / from a childhood sea* is both graphic and intriguing. The shaving soap is *scarped and abraded / to an old-gold moon*, and again the description of its erosion is precise and poetic. The recounting of the wash-and-shave ritual in the second stanza may sound more mundane, but still has an other-worldly quality with its background of the *bathroom wall's posy of oceanic fronds*.

Poems should surprise, such as where *the climb of the earliest owl / threads thicket to star* draws an original and fascinating picture of twilight. Hope is seen to be *winking at the mirror's edge* and offering its promises. Parental watchfulness is *globed in an outside light*. The adjectives at the end of the poem where all is *to be looked back on / in modest happiness, feasible calm* are subtle rather than dramatic, but still capture the reader's imagination.

The poem itself dictated its form. Michael highlights the need to listen to what an emerging poem is saying. In this case, he explains how he 'heard' a voice speaking it in a reflective tone, 'as it took shape, moving from detail to detail as each caught hold of the speaker's thoughts.' This led him to the conclusion that free verse with its slant rhymes was the way to go. There's an onomatopoeic quality to the assonance of both *lunging cull* and *hauled ashore*, and the same quality is present in the full consonance of *mirror's* and *murmurs*.

At the end of the poem, there's a good example of synaesthesia, where the whole experience of moving through life is related via colour. The poet chose *high-day white* to suggest milestones in a relationship, *blaring yellow f*or times of crisis and drama, and *the deep gentle orange* of life viewed in retrospect.

Michael is meticulous over detail. The poem's title was originally written as two separate words. Old School might have meant simply that. Other nuances of meaning came in when the hyphen was added, suggesting something quaint but still meriting approval.

The piece moves, then, from the observation of an empty aftershave bottle to a looking back over the lives that have been lived. As for the future life of the poem, Michael points out: 'I don't know if I triggered something in writing that poem but I've recently made contact with some old friends I haven't seen for years. There might be some inspiration in that, too. It is a rather strange experience: you're happy to see each other but then it's *So...how was, er, life for you, then?* It looks as if the next poem is limbering up and preparing to make its entrance.

To leave the last word to the poet: 'In its final form, the poem is about objects as unlikely diaries, with memories playing about their shapes. I'm happy for the reader to take away anything they wish from the poem. But perhaps it will make them reflect on old-school objects in their own lives: empty, battered and sun-faded now, but still somehow speaking of times when they were quietly vital to life.' W

LINDA GREEN

LINDA GREEN
In Little Stars
Two families divided by hate
A love that will not die
It only takes
one moment
to change two lives forever
A MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LINDA GREEN

Margaret James talks to a novelist who uses her writing to dismantle prejudices and believes there should be more working class characters in fiction

Yorkshire-based novelist Linda Green is a publishing phenomenon, writing bestseller after bestseller, setting her stories in recognisable places, and featuring eminently believable, ordinary-yet-extraordinary characters with whom readers cannot help but identify. Linda's latest novel is *In Little Stars*, a contemporary reimagining of the familiar story in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

'I was one of those children with an over-active imagination,' she says. 'I wrote my first novella, *The Time Machine*, when I was nine years old. It was a pony-based time-travel thriller. When I left primary school, my teacher Mrs Chandler said she looked forward to reading my first published book. I sent it to her twenty-five years later.

'My modern-day version of *Romeo and Juliet* is set in northern England, a place which has been divided by Brexit. I witnessed the tensions caused by the referendum campaign when friends of colour were told to go home. Then a friend who is a French national and her young son, who is of dual heritage, were racially abused in public. No one stepped in to intervene, and this incident inspired my book.

'One of the striking things about Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is that the mothers play such small parts. But mothers are at the hearts of families and, when there are family conflicts, mothers tend to be the peacemakers. My own characters – Sylvie, a French national and midwifery tutor, and Donna, who is working class and deals with complaints for the local council – are very much at the heart of my story, which is told partly from their points of view, and partly from the points of view of their two eldest children, Rachid and Jodie.'

When it comes to writing fiction, is Linda a planner or non-planner?

'As a novelist, I'm very much in the dedicated-planning-and-plotting camp,' she says. 'The first thing I write is the blurb for the back of the novel. I can't start writing the novel until I'm clear about the heart of it, what it is I'm writing, and how I can convey this to readers. The blurb then becomes the synopsis, mainly as a result of talking the plot through with my husband on long walks, trying to identify any plot holes or weaknesses, and asking myself about the characters' motivations, too.

'I have ideas buzzing around in my head all the time. A couple of these ideas might then join up to make a story. My novel *One Moment*, for example, is about bullying and the terrible impact this can have on a child. I also feel there is a need to have more working-class characters in fiction, and I wanted to write about the suffering of people on Universal Credit who were struggling to make ends meet.

'While watching the play *Our Town* at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, I realised I could write about a little boy, who was being bullied, meeting an older woman. She was struggling with life on Universal Credit while looking after her schizophrenic brother, and *One Moment* was born.

'It was then a matter of weaving a plot which would focus on their individual struggles before they met for the first time, and running that story parallel with what happened after the second time they met, when both of their lives were changed forever. It was the most complicated book I've ever plotted, but it worked in the end. The biggest compliment I got was from a reader who messaged me to say it had made her look at people on Universal Credit in a different light. I think illuminating the lives of others for readers is one of the most important things writers can do.

'I tend to be at my writing best in the morning and then again at night time, so I try to save any admin tasks for the afternoon, when I also go for walks in the Yorkshire countryside. As a working mum, life has a habit of getting in the way of writing, so I try not to be hard on myself when other things stop me writing.

'I love going to the theatre with my husband and teenage son. He's a drama student, and this has led me to see many shows to which I'd never otherwise have gone. A novelist can learn so much from how stories are told on stage.'

What does her writing future hold for Linda? 'I think *In Little Stars* could well appeal to a younger, crossover readership, and I certainly wouldn't rule out writing for young adults in the future because I love writing teenage characters,' she says. 'I also have an idea for a children's book. At the moment, I am writing a high-concept novel which includes more humour than my most recently-published books. I've had a run of writing intense, traumatic novels, and I'm enjoying writing this new one immensely.

'I hope to go on moving my readers by coming up with original novels that feature characters who make these readers laugh and cry – and writing a play is still very much on my bucket list, too.'

LINDA'S TOP TIPS

- When people say write what you know, I think the advice should actually be write the emotions you know, because emotions are the most powerful things you have to draw on.

- Be original. Publishing has a tendency to try to follow the big book of the moment with similar books, but these later books are rarely as successful. I think it's better to aim to write the next big thing: something no one else has come up with yet.

- Find a way of writing which works for you, but also remember that any thinking time invested before you start writing Chapter One is never wasted, and can save you a lot of rewriting afterwards.

- The biggest mistake new writers often make is to write the wrong book. It's hard to know what the right book could be, but try not to rush into writing a book inspired by the first idea that comes into your head. Let all your ideas mill around until one takes root, grows and eats away at you every minute of your waking day (and sometimes while you sleep, as well).

- Don't feel you need to go on expensive writing courses or do an MA in creative writing. Learn by reading. Listening to audiobooks is a good way of hearing what works as dialogue, and noticing any points at which a story loses your interest. The same goes for watching films, television, and going to the theatre. A writer never switches off from learning from other writers.

- When you begin rewriting/editing your book, make any big structural changes before you start the interior decorating. This means getting the plot and key characters right before you begin polishing the actual words.

- Maybe think about getting your work professionally critiqued, even if all you can afford is some advice on your synopsis and opening chapters, rather than on the complete novel. I recommend The Literary Consultancy, but there are other companies which offer a similar service.

- Persevere. It took me seven years, 102 rejections from agents and two novels before I got my first book deal.

- If you love writing and don't want to try to get your work published, that's fine, too. Just enjoy your writing!

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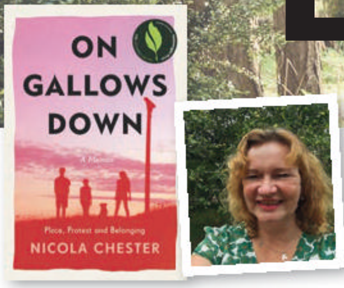


There's more to landscape and nature writing than correctly identifying flora and fauna. **Simon Whaley** chats to one award-winning nature-writer to find out more.

Ten years ago, Frances Lincoln, publishers of the Alfred Wainwright pictorial guides to the Lake District, launched a brand new literary prize for published nature writing books.

Now managed by an independent marketing agency and The National Trust, and sponsored by a Lake District-based paper manufacturer, the James Cropper Wainwright Prize has expanded into three prize categories: nature writing, writing on conservation, and children's writing on nature and conservation.

Nominations for this year's awards close in April, but the growing popularity of nature, landscape, and conservation writing means the market for this genre is blooming. But what exactly is nature or landscape writing, and how can writers break into this market?

Nicola Chester (**https://nicolachester.wordpress.com/**) is a columnist for the RSPB, *Countryfile* magazine, a regular contributor to the *Guardian*'s Country Diary series, and author of *On Gallows Down: Place, Protest and Belonging*, which was shortlisted for the 2022 Wainwright Prize for nature writing.

She believes there are two reasons this genre is growing in popularity.

'I think we are all becoming increasingly aware of the peril our wildlife and planet are in, and how we're actually reliant on it all for our own health and survival,' she says.

'We've lost almost 70% of the earth's wildlife in the last fifty years, and are living through the largest loss of life on earth since the existence of dinosaurs, and this is taking place on our watch. As a species, most of us are as far removed from nature as we've ever been, in where our food comes from, in experiencing its awe, wonder and abundance, and in our connection with it.'

Nicola also believes our experience of lockdowns in recent times has reminded us of what we're losing, but has also helped us appreciate what we have on our own doorstep.

'I think the pandemic accelerated and shone a light on this broken relationship in a new way. Many people sought nature out – at first as a form of exercise and escaping the confines of home – where we could. Those who had access to nature, wildness and the countryside realised they had a genuine privilege. A deep inequality of access to – and the presence of – nature can lead to personal and societal ills. It made us re-address what nature is and what it means to us, to our physical and mental health.

'Writing and reading about it will only become more important as we face the deepening climate and wildlife crises, as well as the crises of inequality, the cost of living, and mental and physical health. It's a way to connect, to deepen our knowledge, to travel without going anywhere, and to understand the world better.'

Experience nature

Writing about nature, the landscape, or conservation does not mean we've got to traipse across isolated, desolate moors or navigate uncharted mountain ranges. As Nicola reveals, we can find nature in a wealth of our experiences.

'Nature is everything! My best moments – with family, friends, or on my own – have been outdoors in nature. It's the air we breathe, the earth we stand on, the other world – that we are intrinsically part of and are reliant on – that we share this one wild, lonely planet with. It gives us pause for awe and wonder.'

Nicola also uses her writing to better comprehend the world around her, which helps her to argue through her words why we should all be working towards protecting what we have left. And because this genre affects the world in which we all live, she feels we should all include some nature in our writing, no matter in which genre we write.

'Writing and reading about it helps me connect with the immediate and wider world, to make sense of it, to celebrate and understand it and crucially, to engage and galvanise others in wanting to protect it and resist its loss. I do feel that nature should be threaded through all writing to make it complete. It's also undergoing a new renaissance of greater diversity of voice – and that is both essential and exciting.'

Personal perceptions

Nature and landscape writing is an accessible genre because we are all part of this planet. It's not about having access to the most beautiful scenic locations, or knowing the Latin name of that fungi growing on the dead tree trunk over there. It's about experiencing the environment we're currently in and noticing it.

When I was a small child, my dad often led fungi forays around parks in south-west London, and I often accompanied him. Despite being the only child among two dozen adults, I always pointed out every beige fungi I spied. When I asked what they were, sometimes my dad reeled off a multi-syllable Latin phrase that made no sense to me at all. At other times, he declared it an 'LBJ'.

It was many years later that I learned LBJ stood for a *little beige job*, a term my dad used when he couldn't identify the fungi in question. But the point is, that didn't stop us from appreciating the wonder of that particular fungi at the time. And it's now become a family joke. Whenever we can't identify anything, it simply gets labelled an LBJ!

'It's important to be honest, too,' Nicola continues. 'There's no shame in not knowing what something is, or the name or identity of a bird or wild plant, but it's always best to admit that, and make it part of your exploration and story. A big part of nature writing is also research and discovery.'

Little did I know back then that I was exhibiting the skills Nicola suggests any budding nature or landscape writer should have.

'Observation, curiosity and the willingness to make connections with your own experiences (or others') and the natural world is key,' she confirms. 'This is more important than knowledge, or having the right clothes or a pair of binoculars.'

Often, it's about noting our experience, using all of our senses, and then learning to interpret it.

'It sometimes takes time to process or understand what we see, feel or witness in a natural encounter,' says Nicola.

So, landscape and nature writing aren't just about detailing the flora and fauna of our world and its habitat. Sometimes it's about the atmosphere of a place, such as the weather's impact on the landscape or the lighting at that moment.

Prize potential

The James Cooper Wainwright Prize has helped spotlight this writing genre, and turned some of its winners into household names. But, as Nicola explains, while the awards are always nice to have and can boost a career, we still need to produce a body of work first before we can win something. Ultimately, writing for ourselves is the best way to begin.

'Prizes like these are hugely important to the genre, because they validate and amplify it – and not just those books and voices who have been chosen to make the long or shortlist, or won the award, but the whole genre. They make it important and relevant and highlight it to readers and writers.

'I sometimes say that my writing career began in 2004, when I won the BBC Nature Writer of the Year Award – but in truth, it began before that, when I was writing for myself and reading about the new nature writing, and deciding that's what I needed to do.

'Writing for competitions is great,' continues Nicola, 'because it hones your craft and gives you deadlines to write to. Of course, winning is wonderful – but it's the writing and the honing that's important. It makes you get better at what you do. In both cases, winning and being highly commended was a huge honour; especially as rural working-class voices, and voices of protest aren't heard that often.'

Environmental exposure

For anyone keen to explore nature writing further, it's important to read the genre to get a feel for what it is, but we should also accept that what we have on our own doorstep is just as interesting as anywhere David Attenborough might travel.

'Although it's wonderful to go somewhere wild and exciting for inspiration,' says Nicola, 'it's absolutely not necessary, or always possible. We are part of nature and we can find nature wherever we are. For example, sometimes, what we think of as the countryside can be very hostile to nature, with the industrial farming practices our food system demands. An urban pocket park, a railway siding, a piece of scrub behind industrial units, a garden shed, your home or you yourself can also be wild. Be inventive. Think about what wildness means to you.'

'Sometimes, the connections, revelations and meaning come after you've experienced the wild thing, once you know what it is and have perhaps explored a relationship with it. Open up your senses and revel in them, as well as your words. Enjoy using metaphor and simile that relate the natural thing back to you and your life – find your own ecological niche, and make it personal!'

We all live in the landscape and among nature. Just because David Attenborough hasn't produced a television programme about the house sparrows living in our suburban privet hedge, doesn't mean we shouldn't write about our observations of them.

The world is changing. Therefore, our landscape and the nature within it are changing too. Perhaps more of us should make it our business to write about our landscape and nature experiences. Not only might it be good for our writing business, but it could also help us play our part in saving the planet. W

Business directory: Nature writing awards and publications

- James Cropper Wainwright Prize: **https://wainwrightprize.com/**
- Nan Shepherd Prize: **www.nanshepherdprize.com/**

Publications

The *Guardian*'s Country Diary series is the world's oldest newspaper column and has some of the best examples of nature and landscape writing every day (including Nicola's contributions): **www.theguardian.com/environment/series/country-diary**

- *Countryfile*: **www.countryfile.com/**
- *The Clearing*: **www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/**
- *Elementum*: **www.elementumjournal.com/**
- *Emergence Magazine*: **https://emergencemagazine.org/**
- Inkcap Journal: **www.inkcapjournal.co.uk/**
- *Resurgence* and *Ecologist*: **www.resurgence.org/magazine/**
- *The Countryman*: **www.dalesman.co.uk/magazines/the-countryman-magazine/**
- *Nature's Home* (RSPB): **www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/**

Money matters

Get up to speed with understanding money and finance as it applies to your writing, with advice from research expert **Tarja Moles**

Animal skins and fur, salt, coins, bank notes, cheques, IOUs, credit card payments, cryptocurrency – money can be understood to mean anything that's used to make payments and to account for credits and debts. This kind of broad definition means that the topic of money can be approached from multiple angles. Here are some ideas for how to get your research started.

Basics

As with any subject area, money-related topics often contain specialist terminology. If the material you're reading looks like gobbledegook, consult a good subject-specific dictionary. They are available in libraries and bookshops. There are also online resources, such as *The Economist's* Economics A to Z (**www.economist.com/economics-a-to-z**), which can help you with unfamiliar terms.

If you want to study further, start by reading textbooks. They explain concepts, theories and principles in a way that help you assimilate new information more systematically. Depending on what your interests are, you could choose textbooks, for example, from the fields of economics, economic history, accounting, banking, political economy or business studies. You can find such books in local and research libraries shelved under 330s of the Dewey Decimal Classification system. Once you've acquired a sufficient foundation, it's easier to continue studying more specialised material.

Even if you don't want to dive too deeply into macroeconomic policies, market forces or different economic theories, some understanding of the subject will be helpful for being able to follow what's going on in the world.

Current news and exchange rates

Money matters are covered in national newspapers and online news sites every day. Most of them contain specific business and money sections – the former focusing on the business world and the latter on personal finance and consumer affairs. When current economic circumstances are tough, money-related news spill over onto the main news sections. Therefore, it may be a good idea to skim all the news headings.

If you're looking for more in-depth business news, read for instance *The Financial Times* (**www.ft.com**), *The Wall Street Journal* (**www.wsj.com**) and/or *The Economist* (**www.economist.com**).

Many newspapers print daily currency exchange rates. If you'd like to know the real-time rates, go online and visit a currency converter, such as the one provided by *The Financial Times* at **https://writ.rs/currency**: not only will you find constantly updated exchange rates and currency performance up to a year, but you can also use the converter tool to calculate currency conversions.

Historical money matters

The origins of money go much further back than the history of coins or banking. All sorts of things, including eggs, thimbles and vodka, have been used in place of money in the past. Whether you're interested in the history of money or how the world or a particular geographical location has developed economically, there are plenty of books and journals that you can study. Research libraries should be your first call as they have a more comprehensive selection of specialist material than small public libraries.

One information-packed tome (784 pages!) is Glyn Davies' *History of Money* (4th edn). If you'd rather not get quite so immersed in the topic, you can find summaries of the book at **https://writ.rs/histofmoney** and **https://writ.rs/moneyorigins**. This website also has links to further resources covering, for example, numismatics, barter, e-money and even financial fiction genres (**https://writ.rs/moneyhistory**). And don't forget to check out *WM*'s sister title, *Coin Collector* magazine, for fascinating articles on money history.

If you'd like to see historical artefacts, you could visit the Bank of England Museum in London (**www.bankofengland.co.uk/museum**). Its collection spans over 1,500 years of history and has 40,000 items, such as those relating to archaeology, coins, banknotes, artworks and social history. Some of the objects are available to view online. The Museum also publishes monthly blog posts (**https://writ.rs/bankblog**) and allows the public to listen to online talks (**https://bit.ly/banktalks**).

To find more money-related museums, do an online search or browse Wikipedia's list of numismatic collections (**https://writ.rs/numislist**) and/or bank museums (**https://writ.rs/bankmuseums**).

If you'd like to research the history of banking, you could explore individual banks and their past. To do this, start by checking what information is available on your chosen bank's website. You can usually locate historical details in the 'About' section. For instance, Barclays summarises its history at **https://writ.rs/barclays**. If the bank has its own archives, this will also be mentioned, along with information on how you can arrange a visit (often by appointment).

Current value of old money, prices and inflation

If you're writing fiction or you're writing a nonfiction piece, say, about inflation since World War II, you may need to find out what things used to cost in the past. Roy Davies has compiled an excellent online portal (**https://writ.rs/priceof**) where there's a hyperlinked list of all sorts of historical money-related information. Topics include, for instance, food prices, wages, purchasing power, historical exchange rates, wartime living costs and passenger ship fares. Some of the links take you to various conversion tools. If these don't solve your conversion queries, try using WolphramAlpha (**https://writ.rs/moneytrends**). It's a computational knowledge engine and allows you to access, among other things, monetary trends and historical market data.

There's a lot of money-related material available if you know where to look. Don't be afraid to dive in and explore the hidden treasures!

Financial scandals

Whether you're looking for some ideas for your fictional stories or writing nonfiction pieces on financial irregularities, Roy Davies' guide and online portal (https://writ.rs/financialscandals) is worth exploring. Topics include the Enron story, money laundering, political corruption, Nigeria-related financial scams, criminal organisations, blood diamonds, bankers behaving badly and much more.

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS
POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

Behind the tape

Expert advice to get the details right in your crime fiction from serving police officer **Lisa Cutts**

If you have a query for Lisa, please send it by email to **lisacuttsenquiries@gmail.com**

Q If my protagonist is outside a mechanic's garage trying not to be shot, what item or items would likely be stored outside, around the building, that she can hide behind for cover? She isn't armed so escape is unlikely.

Sam Kelso via Twitter

A If it's a case of hiding behind something that will protect her from bullets, her best hiding place would be behind an engine block, if any happen to be around. Whilst not guaranteed to protect her, it will, however, do a better job than a car door as is often portrayed on television or films.

Q Would the police be able to help someone who has taken a heroin overdose? I'd like one of my police characters to save someone's life rather than the paramedics but I'm not sure if this is feasible.

Jon Knoll via email

A Some police forces allow those officers who are medically trained to administer Naloxone to drug users who have overdosed on heroin, as well as some other opioid drugs. It rapidly reverses the effects of an overdose which leads to breathing slowing and eventually stopping. Even if your police officer administers the Naloxone, emergency medical treatment would still be required, which is most likely to be a team of paramedics.

Q My protagonist is a police sergeant. Would he be able to socialise with friends who are on police bail and being investigated for criminal offences?

Julie Erskin via email

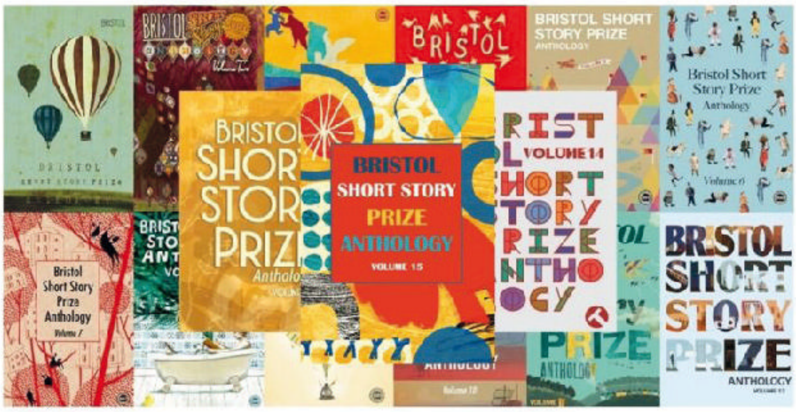
A Anything that is likely to call an officer's integrity into question is a concern for the force. All officers and police staff need to undergo vetting before they join the police, and this is ongoing throughout their careers. Officers and staff are required to complete vetting forms if their circumstances, be they financial or social, change drastically or may negatively impact on them. They are also duty bound to report anything as it occurs, including spending time off duty with anyone with a criminal record or under investigation. Your police sergeant should not be spending time with suspects on bail and should report any such activity to his line manager.

LISA CUTTS
Lost Lives
Even the deadliest secrets can't stay hidden forever
Lisa Cutts
Buried Secrets
Whatever you do...
DON'T TRUST HIM
LISA CUTTS
MURDER in the Village
LISA CUTTS

Lisa Cutts is a crime fiction author and retired detective sergeant, having spent most of her career within the Serious Crime Department. She has returned to work as an Investigating Officer on historic crimes. Her novels are published by Myriad and Simon and Schuster.

WRITERS' NEWS

Your essential monthly round-up of competitions, paying markets, opportunities to get into print and publishing industry news



Get creative for Bristol

The 2023 Bristol Short Story Prize is inviting entries.

The annual contest has a £1,000 prize for the winner.

The Bristol Short Story Prize is for original, unpublished short stories up to 4,000 words, in any genre or style. It is open to all writers, published and unpublished.

The first prize is £1,000, and there are second and third prizes of £500 and £250. Seventeen further shortlisted writers will each win £100. All 20 shortlisted entries will be published in *Bristol Short Story prize Anthology Volume 16* by Tangent Books. The £100 Samson Award will be presented to the highest-placed story by a Bristol writer. This year's judging panel is literary agent Abi Fellows, writer, editor and creative producer Heather Marks and writer and independent bookshop manager Daniel Ross.

The entry fee is £9 per story. 250 free online entries are available for writers for whom the entry fee is a barrier to submitting.

The closing date is 26 April.

Website: www.bristolprize.co.uk

SAY YES TO YEOVIL

The Yeovil Literary Prize

The Yeovil Literary Prize 2023 is inviting entries.

The prestigious international contest organised by Yeovil Community Arts Association offers prizes for creative writing in five categories

- **Novel:** The prizes are £1,250, £300 and £125. Enter up to 10,000 words, including a 500-word synopsis, of an original, unpublished novel manuscript. The entry fee is £14.50.
- **Short story:** The prizes are £600, £250 and £125. Enter original, unpublished short stories up to 2,000 words. The entry fee is £8.
- **Poetry:** The prizes are £600, £250 and £125. Enter original, unpublished poems up to 40 lines. The entry fee is £5 per poem.
- **Children/Young Adult Novel:** The prizes are £600, £250 and £125. Enter 3,000 words plus a 500-word synopsis of an original, unpublished novel for children or young adults. The entry fee is £12.50.
- **Writing Without Restrictions:** The prizes are £250, £125 and £75. Enter original, unpublished work in the category for inventive, different or fun writing. The entry fee is £6.

The closing date is 31 May.

Website: https://www.yeovilprize.co.uk/

POEMS FOR THE PLANET

GINKGO
PRIZE

Win a first prize of £5,000 in the major international award for ecopoetry, The Gingko Prize 2023.

The annual Gingko Prize, the world's largest ecopoetry prize, is inviting submissions of original, unpublished poems.

There is a first prize of £5,000, a second prize of £2,000 and a third prize of £1,000.

For the the third year in a row, the additional AONB Prize of £500 will be awarded for 'Best Poem of UK Landscape'. This prize is free to enter for writers who have already entered the 2023 Gingko Prize.

The entry fee is £7 for the first poem and £4 for each additional poem.

The closing date is 25 March.

Website: https://ginkgoprize.com/

INTERNATIONAL ONLINE MARKET

Brain pickings

By Gary Dalkin

MENTAL FLOSS

Mental Floss is a large US entertainment site which covers a wide range of topics in a light and informative way. Sections range from answering Big Questions to various aspects of history (with special sections on the UK royal family, US presidents, the Titanic and archaeology, among others), as well as general coverage of pop culture, TV, movies, books, and departments for travel, health and life hacks. Recent stories have ranged from 'What's the Difference Between Hard and Soft Water?' and 'Why Do We Gasp When We're Surprised or Alarmed?', to 'A Brief History of "Auld Lang Syne"' and a look at '6 Novels That Controversially Fictionalized Real Events'.

The editorial team are 'always looking for new voices' and suggest you spend some time reading the site before pitching to familiarize yourself with the content, tone, and scope, and to make sure that they haven't already covered the topic you're planning to pitch.

Your pitch should be no longer than two paragraphs, and if you have a particular expertise in the subject do mention it. If possible include a link to your online portfolio or to a couple of samples of work, but don't send attachments or completed articles. Include a possible headline for your story as part of your pitch's subject line, i.e: 'Freelance Pitch: 50 Amazing Facts About Animals'.

The editorial team are always eager to receive list-based pitches covering the who, what, when, and where of a subject, plus its significance, with particular attention to quirky or little-known facts. Popular topics are people or events that have a major anniversary coming up, historical figures and events, movies and TV, popular music, literature and art, language, food and drink, helpful tips, scientific discoveries and phenomena, true crime, pop culture fads and personalities. Other features can be either 500 word shorts or 800-1,500 longer pieces.

It's vital to follow the very extensive pitching guide at **https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/625670/how-to-pitch-mental-floss**. Payment starts at $150 US for a list, $125 for a short article and $200 for a longer feature. Send your pitch by email, as appropriate to:

Books, Literature, Words, Language: Erin McCarthy **erin@minutemedia.com**; Entertainment (Movies, TV, Music), Pop Culture: Jennifer M. Wood **jennifer@minutemedia.com**; Animals, Science, Environment, Exploration: Kat Long **kat@minutemedia.com**; History, Art, Travel, Culture, Food, Pets: Kerry Wolfe **kerry@minutemedia.com**; All Other Pitches: **webpitches@mentalfloss.com**

Read Mental Floss before pitching at **www.mentalfloss.com** and follow on Facebook **@mentalflossmagazine**/Twitter **@mental_floss**

Comp for children and young people

WHAT DOES
WAR
MEAN TO YOU?

Never Such Innocence is a charity which began as a First World War commemoration project for children and young people and today delivers workshops, special events and an International Competition for the creative arts, writes Jenny Roche.

The 2023 competition is part of a three-year Conversations on Conflict and invites poetry, artwork, songs and speeches on the theme of 'What does war mean to you'. International submissions may be made as a individual or collaboratively in the age groups of 9-11 years, 11-14 years, 14-16 years and 16-18 years. The age groups cross over to 'ensure children in the same school have an equal opportunity'.

Poetry should be a maximum 40 lines and if not written in English should include a copy written in the poet's native language together with a video or recording in the native language.

In the artwork category sculptures, models, paintings, sketches, photography and works in digital mediums will all be considered. Submit a high quality photograph or scan of the piece in the first instance.

Songs should be no more than four minutes long. Judging will be based on melody, composition, originality and where applicable, the lyrics. Speeches should be a maximum five minutes/750 words long and for both speeches and songs an audio or video recording should be submitted along with written text/lyrics.

NEVER SUCH INNOCENCE
A CREATIVE PROJECT
GIVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE A VOICE ON CONFLICT

Poems, songs and speeches may be written in any language and should be typed or legibly handwritten and all artwork and poetry submissions should have a title.

Submit one entry per individual or group to an individual category. Entries may however be made to more than one category. Submissions from those aged 15 years and younger must be made by an parent/guardian or teacher. Any special educational needs may be mentioned on the entry form.

The closing date for submissions is 10 March 2023 and all entrants will receive a special personalised Certificate of Commendation and the winners will be published in a Winners Booklet. See website to read previous winners' booklets.

Website: www.neversuchinnocence.com/2022-23-competition

FLASHES

WM subscriber and Scottish romance author Julie Shackman has signed a new four-book deal with her publisher, HarperCollins imprint; One More Chapter.

Litro Literary Journal is inviting submissions of short fiction, flash fiction and nonfiction on any theme for its summer issue, The Open Issue. The maximum wordcount is 5,000. Submit by 27 March. Website: **www.litromagazine.com/submit-your-work/**

Legend Press has announced a partnership with South African publisher Blackbird Books, with the aim of bringing more African literary voices to a wider global readership.

All that matters is that you make the work the best it can be, and get it out there.
Benjamin Myers

INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MARKET

The great outdoors

Jenny Roche

Open to pitches year round for articles and visual essays from around the world the online journal/newsletter *ætla magazine* aims to be a 'route into the outdoors' and is 'passionate about environmental action, conscious well being and ethical living'. Check the website for a deadline for the biannual print magazine.

Topics to pitch ideas for include sustainable travel and adventure, conscious and slow living, wellness and spirituality and sustainable living. It is advised you familiarise yourself with the tone and style of the magazine before pitching and content can be read online.

Pieces are generally 800-2,000 words long and are stories of adventure, hope and ingenuity. You are invited to be creative with your submission and in addition to writing about the bare bones of your travel or adventure you should include the details of your experience and most importantly, how it made you feel.

When pitching say whether it is for a written story or visual essay. Suggest a title and give a one-paragraph outline of the story or the images you would include for a visual essay. Include the first paragraph of your story, introduction to a visual essay or a small portfolio or previously published written work together with 3-4 images or a link to an online gallery with the original imagery for your story. Also include 150-200 words on a behind-the-scenes experience to the story. It should be noted that all submissions must not have been previously published and are written in English.

Payment for online stories is £35-£75 and for print £60-£150.

Details: Email: hello@aetla.co
Website: https://www.aetla.co/submissions

BY AND FOR YOUNG FILM ENTHUSIASTS

Film Junior is a magazine for those under 15 years old and mainly written by writers of that age group. *Film Junior* is published as a 52 page A5 print magazine four times a year. There are however future plans to make the magazine bigger and to produce a digital option.

Interviews with film makers and ideas for features are wanted. 'We're looking for people who might want to go behind the scenes of their local cinema … we want to get your questions about films and filmmaking answered,' says editor Simon Brew.

Those who would like to write for the magazine should email an idea of what they would like to write about and say a little about themselves. **JR**

Details: email: junior@filmstories.co.uk; website: www.filmstories.co.uk/film-stories-junior-magazine/

FILM JUNIOR
SEARCHING FOR 'U' CERTIFICATE FILMS
THE UPCOMING FILMS YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS
HOW TO MAKE A FILM WITH JUST YOU AND YOUR FRIEND
LOOK WHO'S BACK!
WE CHAT TO THE STAR OF THE NEW SONIC THE HEDGEHOG MOVIE!
& MUCH MORE!

WORLD BOOK NIGHT 2023

It's World Book Night on April 23 – Shakespeare's birthday, and possibly also the anniversary of his death – a programme run by the charity The Reading Agency, *writes Gary Dalkin*. It is held with the aim of bringing people from all backgrounds together to inspire others to read more. Organisations and individuals will be holding events up and down the country to celebrate the difference that reading can make in people's lives, from book themed parties at home to books swaps in offices. The Reading Agency notes that reading for pleasure is a globally recognised indicator in a huge range of social issues from poverty to mental health, yet in England 36% of people don't regularly read. Find out more at: **https://worldbooknight.org** For a writer there are even opportunities to promote your own work simply by meeting people and talking about your books and encouraging others to read or write themselves.

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE MARKET

Intersectional culture and politics

PDR Lindsay-Salmon

GUERNICA
a magazine of art & politics

Founded online in 2004, *Guernica* is an award-winning non-profit magazine, with an editorial team 'focused on the intersection of arts and politics.' Work for *Guernica* should be incisive, asking the necessary questions. The team, all dedicated volunteers, seek submissions of 'memoir, reporting, interviews, commentary, poetry, fiction, and multimedia journalism exploring identity, conflict, culture, justice, science, and beyond.' They like 'to feature singular perspectives on the critical issues facing our world today' and are 'always looking for new voices.' dedicated to promoting and disseminating rigorous, incisive, and engaging writing on every aspect of literature, culture, and the arts.

Guernica publishes poetry, essays, reportage/journalism, criticism, and fiction. *Guernica Global Spotlights* publishes 'work from outside the Western corridors of literary taste-making and prestige.' The aim is to highlight global innovation and experimentation in fiction and nonfiction – 'especially when it blurs the boundaries between genres – and to boost independent publishers and their writers.' Works in translation are welcomed. Submit short stories, novel excerpts, and hybrid texts, especially 'fiction that is adventurous, unapologetic, experimental.' In non-fiction, send essays, reportage, memoir, criticism, and hybrid forms, especially work which pushes against established forms or blurs boundaries, either by building new modes or complicating old ones.'

Limit work to 'between 3,000 and 7,000 words,' which has been 'published within the last year by magazines, zines, and independent publishing houses.' Check the specific details for submissions and follow them. Non-fiction, use the correct form for journalism or reportage, essays, memoir, criticism, and argument of 2,500 words or more. Submit the completed manuscript and put Reportage in the subject line if the work is a piece of journalism or reportage. Add Timely to the subject line if the work is a time-sensitive piece.

Submit poetry in the correct form on the submissions page. Submit one to five poems at one time, in one submission. For fiction, use the fiction form. Work must be between 2,000 and 7,000 words.

Payment: US$50 for poetry, US$100 for original essays, and US$150 for original fiction and for reportage/journalism.

Website: https://www.guernicamag.com

Scottish
Mountaineering
Press

AMPLIFYING NATURE

Poetry, prose and visual art from writers and artists of all backgrounds are invited for *Creatives,* a digital platform which has been published by the award winning Scottish Mountaineering Press since February 2021, *writes Jenny Roche*.

Concerned essentially with Scotland's natural wonders, the platform seeks also to help promote and showcase writers and artists to a wider audience. 'Our purpose is to encourage longevity, provide sustainable tools for craft development and, perhaps more importantly, to foster positive relationships with Scotland's outdoors'.

Submit no more than three fiction pieces up to total word count of 2,500 words and/or a maximum of five poems/six pages. Non-fiction submissions may be essays, memoirs or interviews and up to three pieces of a total word count of 2,500 words may be submitted. Audio interviews should be made in one of the following formats – MP3, M4A, WAV, AAC or AIFF. See website for how to submit visual art and videography works.

For all submissions editor Alex Marceau says: 'We value fresh insights and perspectives, humorous or unconventional narratives, well developed characters and plots, clarity of purpose'. Check out previous publications on the website to see more.

No submission should have been previously published in print or online and simultaneous submissions are acceptable with the usual proviso.

Make your submissions along with a short bio in the body of an email to:
alex@scottishmountaineeringpress.com

Website: https://scottishmountaineeringpress.com/creatives/submissions/

ALL LANGUAGES WELCOME

A new magazine of international literature, the quarterly Scotland based *Interpret* welcomes poetry and short stories from writers around the world and submissions may be made in any language, *writes Jenny Roche*.

Editor James Appleby is a professional translator of French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian and submissions in any of these languages do not require a translation. Submission in other language do need to be accompanied by a full translation into English. Selected pieces will be published first in their original language followed by an English translation. Check out the website to read a recent copy of the magazine.

There are no restriction on genre or form for poetry or short stories. Fiction should be a maximum 2,500 words. No submission should have been previously published and this includes on a website. Publication on a private social media account is fine. Simultaneous submissions will be considered and you should notify the magazine immediately if the piece becomes accepted elsewhere. Translators may submit work for which they hold the copyright and have the necessary permission from the original author/s.

Payment of £10, or the equivalent currency, will be paid to all contributors including translators.

Submit a maximum of six poems or three short stories along with a 20-word third person bio to:
interpretmagazine@outlook.com

Website: www.interpretmagazine.com

FLASHES

Aberdeen-based crime festival Granite Noir will run for a second year from 23 February. Featured writers include Val McDermid, Vaseem Khan, Louise Welsh and Cailean Steed, whose piece on writing dual narratives is on p12. **https://www.aberdeenperformingarts.com/granite-noir/**

The shortlist for the Slightly Foxed Best First Biography Prize 2022 is: Tony Davidson, *Confessions of a Highland Art Dealer: A Journey in Art, a Glen and Changing Times;* Charles Elson, *Cimino: The Deer Hunter, Heaven's Gate and the Price of a Vision;* Matt Rowland Hill, *Original Sins: A Memoir;* Katherine Rundell, *Super-Infinite: The Transformations of John Donne;* Harry Sidebottom, *The Mad Emperor: Heliogabalus and the Decadence of Rome;* Osman Yousefzada, *The Go-Between: A Portrait of Growing Up Between Different Worlds.* The £2,500 prize will be awarded on 14 March.

'Taking life advice from John Donne would be a disastrous strategy. He made decisions in the moment that would ruin his life, like his marriage to Anne More. But the thing that he can tell us rings true now, quite urgently, about the need to see clearly the fact of death. The need to celebrate and embrace the body and the mind together.'
Poet Katherine Rundell talking to the *Guardian* about her Baillie Gifford prize-winning biography of Donne, *Super-Infinite.*

INTERNATIONAL PRINT MARKET

Apocalyptic aftermath

PDR Lindsay-Salmon

Hungry Shadow Press is looking for short stories for its new anthology: *The First Five Minutes of the Apocalypse*. Submissions are invited of 'short horror, weird, dark fiction which deals with a fictional apocalypse.' Writers are asked to place the story 'within a short period of time (less than a day) at the beginning of a fictional apocalypse.' Stories should involve the aftermath and should not be set 'at the inception point or the origin of the apocalyptic event' ie, shouldn't be about the event itself but about the dreadful effects of the event where 'it all started for the POV character(s). Make it personal. Make it weird. Make it disturbing. Make it beautiful.' Avoid zombies if possible unless they are really different and original.

Submit short horror, weird, dark fiction stories between 1,500 and 4,000 words with strong elements of horror, weird fiction, or dark fiction. Simultaneous submissions are fine, but no multiple subs or reprints. Format the story as a standard manuscript format: double-spaced, 12pt font, word count and email address on the first page. Submit online including a brief cover letter and contact details.

Payment is US$0.03 per word, paid via PayPal, plus an ebook copy of the anthology for 'Exclusive First Worldwide Publication, Print, and Electronic Rights for three months, and non-exclusive rights thereafter.'

The closing date is 28 February.

Website: https://www.hungryshadowpress.com

Guidelines: https://www.hungryshadowpress.com/submissions-the-first-five-minutes-of-the-apocalypse; submit online

UK MAGAZINE MARKET

Exploring undeath

Gary Dalkin

The Earth Issue
Cunning Folk

Cunning Folk is a themed UK print magazine and website founded by Scotland-based writer Elizabeth Kim devoted to explorations of 'magic, mythology and folklore'. The editorial team are currently open to pitches and submissions for issue 6 and require stories on the theme of 'The Vampire'. Deadline is 1 March.

The team ask: Why does this monster appear to us in dreams and sleep paralysis? Why are we scared of – and fascinated by – the liminal space between life and death? What even is death? What is it to live forever? And what does the vampire's infinite quest for blood tell us of our own lives? Are we, too, a little vampiric? How can we fend off the vampire's exterior and interior to ourselves?

They want articles, interviews, poetry and short fiction that shines light on what lies behind the vampire's façade and what that tells us about the current age, 'the unconscious shadow' and humanity. The theme can be explored via journalism, art, literature, science, pop culture, personal essays, articles and interviews, particularly with authors or scholars.

Keep things brief. In essence an elevator pitch with an additional sentence or two to flesh your idea out and give a clear sense of the narrative. Send your ideas to **cunningfolkmagazine@gmail.com**. You can also submit short stories between 1,000-6,000 words. Payment is £100 per article, interview or story. £50 for poetry. Full guidelines at: **www.cunning-folk.com/contact**

CREATIVE POETRY

Win a €1,000 first prize plus a creative writing course in the Creative Writing Ink Poetry Prize 2023.

The Creative Writing Ink Poetry Prize is inviting entries of original, unpublished poems up to 42 lines, in any style or form.

The first prize is €1,000 plus an online Creative Writing Ink course of the winner's choice. The judge is Eileen Casey. The winning poem will be published online.

The entry fee is €6 for the first poem and €5 for any subsequent poems.

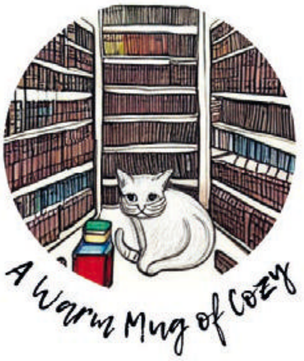
The closing date is 31 March.

Website: https://creativewriting.ie/creative-writing-ink-poetry-prize-2023/

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL MARKET

Cosy tea break

PDR Lindsay-Salmon


A Warm Mug of Cozy

Warm Mug of Cozy Anthology is a brand new journal with an editorial team seeking short stories which follow the rules of the classic cosy mystery, which are provided online, and include being set in a small town or tightly knit community and featuring an amateur detective.

Stories, no more than 5,000 words, must be sent according to strict guidelines. Do read them carefully and follow them. No simultaneous submission. Up to 5 stories may be submitted and they might accept a very special reprint.

Format work in the standard publishing format and save the file as a PDF or Word document. Draft to Digital (D2D) will handle royalty payments, and sales reports. Writers will need to set up a D2D account, which is free. Response time is 'within 12 hours'.

Payment is a small fee and 'ongoing royalties + PDF copy of the anthology.'

The closing date is 31May.

Website: https://warmmugofcozy.com/anthology-submission

A shadow over spec-fic mags

Amazon is to end digital magazine and newspaper subscriptions in September, along with a service which has been around for a decade in the US, but was never launched in the UK, the 'print textbook rental program', *writes Gary Dalkin*. An Amazon spokesperson told *Publishers Weekly*: 'Following an assessment of our print textbook rentals and our magazine and newspaper subscriptions and single-issue sales, we have made the difficult decision to discontinue these services. We don't take these decisions lightly, and are winding down these offerings in a phased manner over several months.'

This decision may seriously impact fiction magazines, as since the decline of print distribution many speculative fiction titles, among them *Analog, Apex, Asimov's, Clarkesworld, The Dark, Forever, Fantasy Magazine, F&SF, Galaxy's Edge, Lightspeed, Nightmare Magazine* and *Uncanny* make most of their income through digital subscriptions, often through Amazon, though also through other outlets including their own websites. Any lack of availability on Amazon may mean many people never even discover such titles exist, and readers are less likely to search for them elsewhere online, potentially threatening the future of many digital titles.

Neil Clarke, publisher and editor of *Clarkesworld*, wrote: 'Earnings from Amazon subscriptions provide a varying and sometimes significant portion of the revenue that these (speculative fiction) publications require to stay in business. If you don't already know, genre magazines are subscription-driven, meaning that subscriptions make up the bulk of their income. … None of these magazines are entirely reliant on Amazon, but as the largest ebook retailer in the field, the cancelation of this program will hurt and in some cases, hurt badly. Badly enough to shutter a magazine? Maybe. It's too soon to tell and there are a lot of variables, including you.'

Reading between the lines, it appears that the move is designed by Amazon to force magazines to join its Kindle Unlimited programme, as some, though not all subscription titles are being offered the option to join KU as an alternative. *Clarkesworld* is one of these titles, and it looks like Amazon wants all digital magazines in one place, presumably to greater increase the appeal of Kindle Unlimited. For customers it seems like a bad deal, as rather than being able to buy a single issue of a title or subscribe to it, soon readers will have to pay a monthly subscription to access titles they will never own, along with many other titles they may have no interest in. And that's for the magazines Amazon decides to allow into the KU ecosystem. Smaller and less prestigious magazines than *Asimov's* and *Clarkesworld* look like they will be out on their own. Amazon says it will begin notifying customers about the changes in March.

Tech-savvy

When it comes to using computers, **Patrick Forsyth** knows he's not alone in needing a helping hand

Driven in part by the development of print on demand, the possibilities of self-publishing have currently never been more evident, and the range of options has never been wider. This ranges from the vagaries and false promises of vanity publishing (about which one only needs a single word of advice: avoid), through assisted publishing (of which there are some very professional and useful examples) to the simple process of putting your book on Amazon. Simple? Well that rather depends on one's level of computer familiarity.

Many people find they use their computers a great deal, and certainly this is true for most writers, but most use only a tiny percentage of its features. Furthermore, when we do something for the first time then it often takes a while to get the hang of it; then it's a frustrating and time-consuming process that some people would rather avoid. While promoting a self-published book is another matter it is possible to get help to actually produce a book (in both ebook and printed form), and there are many ready to assist.

Someone who knows the Amazon system backwards, can turn a word document into a published book in a short time and do so with little or no hassle can be invaluable. I was offered good advice by writer and designer Paul Burridge who also provides designs for covers at a good mix of quality and reasonable cost (his website is **www.publishingbuddy.co.uk**).

You need to think about marketing as well and might also want to have a professional copy edit done, but I applaud the fact that such publishing services exist. Of course, you can do all this yourself, but it might well produce a better result with some assistance.

FLASHES

The rescheduled Gwyl Anglesey Writing Festival will take place from 29 April. The festival will make a welcome return after being postponed for two years due to Covid. Website: **https:/gwylangleseyfestival.uk/**

Literary agents Felicity Bryan Associates has launched FBA New Voices, a mentorship scheme where three underrepresented writers working towards their first novel or short story collection will be offered spaces.

'…the island can be a very eerie place. There are empty houses with abandoned cars in the drives and net curtains in glassless windows. Obsolete inland roads populated only by small-eyed sheilings with rusted corrugated roofs. Stony ruins of blackhouses and long-forgotten villages. Old coffin roads, where those living in the rocky east used to carry their loved ones to the machair graveyards in the west. Standing stones and circles, sharing fields with sheep and Highland cows. In Celtic mythology, the Western Isles are said to be thin places: spiritual landscapes where the walls between this world and other worlds are porous and at their thinnest – and it is almost impossible not to believe it.' Carole Johnstone, author of *Mirrorland* and her new novel, *The Blackhouse*, writing on CrimeReads about moving to live on the Isle of Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides.

INTERNATIONAL LITERARY MARKET

Imprint for the underrepresented

Jenny Roche

McCLELLAND
& STEWART

McClelland & Stewart is an imprint of Penguin Random House Canada and is keen to 'amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous and racialised writers as well as those of other traditionally under represented communities' from around the world.

Literary fiction, non-fiction and poetry book proposals are invited from individuals and groups as well as multiple entries written by multiple people.

Guidelines for the length of completed submissions are 80,000-100,000 words for fiction and non-fiction and 7,000-10,000 words or approximately 70 pages and more for poetry.

Submit via an email with 'a strong letter of intent about your project' a list of similar books to the one you are submitting and a short bio. The submission of a full manuscript as a pdf or .doc attachment is encouraged for fiction and poetry. For non-fiction submit a preliminary chapter list with 1-2 sentences about each chapter to show how you intend to write about the topic. A writing sample should also be included. You should gain a response to your submission within four months.

Details: email: mcclellandsubmissions@penguinrandomhouse.com; website: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/imprints/MS/mcclelland-stewart/submissions

INTERNATIONAL ONLINE MARKET

Changemaking conversations

Gary Dalkin

MOB
LAB

The Mobalisation Lab developed out of Greenpeace International in 2011 and today is an independent organisation of around 7,000 advocacy campaigners, leaders, grassroots activists, academics, funders, policy makers, social entrepreneurs and technologists who represent a diversity of backgrounds and experience. The Mob Lab website publishes stories, lessons and reports about innovations in advocacy campaigning to provide the inspiration and know-how necessary to build more effective and collaborative campaigns and organisations.

Led by Ani Phoebe Hao, the editorial team are open to pitches for stories between 500-1,200 words, either by someone with first-hand experience of a particular campaign or organisation or by a knowledgeable observer. Hao notes that much writing about advocacy campaigning concentrates on five Ws: 'Who, What, Where, When, and Why'. Conversely, Mob Lab wants stories that focus on the practical realities of 'How'. That is 'timely, accurate and practical information about the mechanics of changemaking that readers can use to inform their own work'.

A successful Mobilisation Lab story might be an interview with a campaigner explaining an innovative strategy behind a protest. It could address collaboration between individuals or organisations; explore issues around narrative, framing and storytelling to inspire people to want to make change; look at the tools, tech and tactics available to campaigners in a particular field; or consider aspects of safety and security when running an advocacy campaign. Recent stories include '#StopTheFlights: how we forced airlines to pull out of the Rwanda scheme', a look at MetBo, 'an example of refugee-led creative campaigning in the UK' and 'A4 and Authoritarianism', an essay in solidarity with Chinese dissenters.

Send a one-paragraph pitch about why your story idea is relevant to Mob Lab's readers and how it showcases transformative, people-centered or collaborative campaigning. Also include a short bio and any links to articles that you've written, to **editor@mobilisationlab.org** or **ani@mobilisationlab.org**. Payment is between $250 -$500 US depending on the topic, word count and amount of reporting required. Full guidelines at **https://mobilisationlab.org/about/work-with-us/contributor-guidelines**

Age related

The du Maurier Festival Society presents
FOWEY FESTIVAL
OF ARTS AND LITERATURE

The theme is 'I'll Never be Young Again' in Fowey Festival Short Story Competition 2023

The annual Fowey Festival Short Story Competition For Adults has chosen the title of Daphne du Maurier's second novel, published in 1932, for the theme of its annual creative writing contest.

There are prizes of £250 and £100.

Enter original, unpublished short stories up to 1,500 words.

The entry fee is £10.

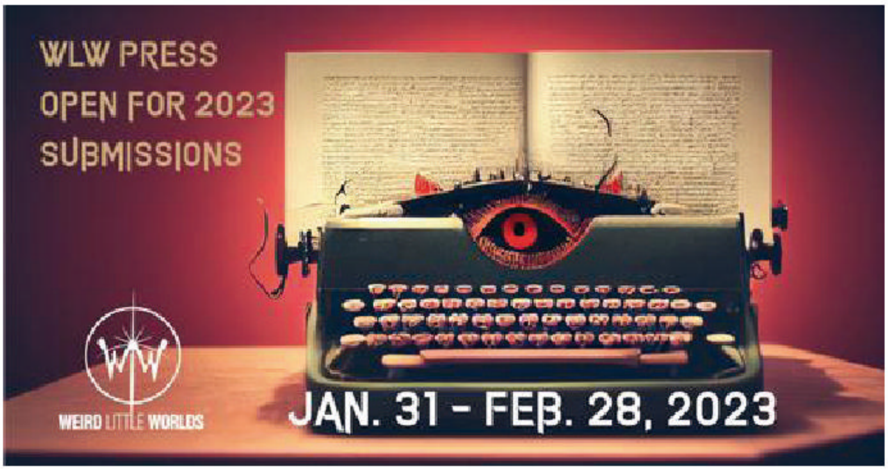
The closing date is 5 March.

Website: www.foweyfestival.com

INTERNATIONAL SPEC-FIC MARKET

Weird little words for Weird Little Worlds

Gary Dalkin



US speculative fiction small press Weird Little Worlds Press is open to unsolicited submissions until the end of February. The Press plans to publish at least four novels this year and the unsolicited submissions period is designed to give authors of all experience levels the same opportunity of having their work read.

Co-founder and editor Willow Dawn Becker is looking for speculative fiction including science fiction, fantasy, horror, supernatural fiction, alternative history, etc. and wants stories that are fresh and unexpected. Becker notes that illumination and change are core values of Weird Little Worlds, and that they are 'particularly looking for stories that build bridges, expand our knowledge and compassion, and motivate us towards actions that improve the world and how we relate to it'. She will also consider non-fiction stories of adventure and survival.

Not wanted are literary fiction, romance or true crime. No excessive language, gore or sex. Think in terms of what is acceptable in a 12 certificate film — some swearing, occasionally strong, with sex and violence presented with no or little graphic detail. Also avoid rehashed tropes, plots and characters. Your work has the best chance if it has already been through at least two rounds of editing, preferably by at least one person who isn't your mother, and then been proofread.

Use standard Shunn novel format. Don't include your name on your submission manuscript as the submission process is anonymous, with the intention that talent, execution, and concept is focused upon rather than an author's name or following.

Payment is by negotiation but promises 'excellent pay for excellent work', potentially with an advance royalty. Essential to follow the full guidelines at **https://weirdlittleworlds.com/submissions-guidelines**/ and then make your submission here: **https://weirdlittleworlds.com/submissions/**

EXTRA EDGE

Leading speculative fiction magazine *Galaxy's Edge* is changing from a bi-monthly magazine to a bi-annual anthology series, *writes Gary Dalkin*. There will be two more regular issues before the title is relaunched at the end of the year. Editor Lezli Robyn announced, '…this new format will make it easier to get into brick-and-mortar bookstores through a full-service distributor. It will also allow us to raise the rates we pay our authors as well as give us greater flexibility to buy more novelettes and novellas, which has been restricted by the current format.' A new submissions system will be announced later this year. Whether the change has anything to do with Amazon ending digital magazine subscriptions is unclear. Read Robyn's full statement at **https://writ.rs/lezli**

Novel Ideas

A patchwork of words

Lynne Hackles recommends stitching scraps of stories together

I am not programmed to sew. This may have begun at school when, during a needlework class, I was asked to stand on the table and do a twirl in the skirt I made. I obeyed, twirling enthusiastically, until the skirt fell from the waistband and I came to a halt in my knickers. I digress. This often happens. I meant to talk about a sort of story-sewing. Let's call it the Patchwork Method.

When making patchwork, I believe that one square is stitched to another, and another until a quilt is made. This works with writing too. Sometimes you have to write a bit, then add a bit and keep going until you have a complete story.

Using this method I once wrote a whole book of tips on writing. During the day, I left an open notebook and pen on the table and added bits as I thought of them. During the night, the notebook was on my bedside table in case I woke in the early hours with a brilliant idea in my head. It's always best to capture these immediately otherwise they disappear by morning.

Have you ever had an opening sentence but didn't know what was going to happen next? You could consider this as threading your needle ready for a bit of patchworking. Stories, poems, articles, essays and novels all start off with one sentence and if you can't get further than that, try this method. You may discover your work grows slowly, at its own pace, until suddenly, after days or weeks of adding a sentence or even a word, it takes on a growth spurt and you can sit and finish a whole section, paragraph, page, or even the entire project.

I am now off to thread my literary needle and, hopefully, add a bit more to a story in progress.

FLASHES

Poet Selima Hill has become the first person to be awarded the King's Gold Medal for Poetry. The 2022 medal is the first to be presented in the King's name since he acceded to the throne.

Following the 2022 closure of Al Saqi bookshop in London, Maqam Books is crowdfunding a new independent, youth-led bookshop and community space for Arabic books in the capital.

Author Hanif Kureishi, who lost the use of his arms and legs after collapsing in Rome, has been dictating tweets to family members, revealing his situation as it unfolds. *WM* would like to add our voice to the vast number wishing him the very best for his recovery.

The Society of Editors has made the future of royal reporting a key focus for its 2023 conference on 15 March. Prince Harry's memoir *Spare*, which trumpets his grievances against the media, has sold more than 1.4 million copies worldwide and according to the Guinness Book of Records is the fastest-selling book of all time.

'Write as if you're telling a story to a friend. Write as if no-one is ever going to read it.' Terry McMillan

INTERNATIONAL ONLINE MARKET

In the pipeline

Gary Dalkin

PIPELINE ARTISTS

Pipeline Artists is a US website with a focus on 'education, empowerment, and elevating authentic voices' in film, publishing and the arts. The editorial team led by editor-in-chief Jeanne Veillette Bowerman are looking for pieces that highlight unspoken truths, provide honest advice, and profile 'emerging' creatives or those deserving of a platform they may not find in mainstream publications. They also want 'ridiculous humor pieces' because 'sometimes the world needs ridiculous humor'.

They are currently accepting pitches for feature articles, including interviews, particularity focusing on publishing or any hot topic in the arts, as well as short stories of any length and poetry. Recent articles have explored 'Using Music to Boost Creativity', 'Adapting a Screenplay into a Graphic Novel' and 'Filtering Grief and Loss Through Art'. Pipeline stories can be 'light and breezy', deeply serious, political or otherwise.

Pitch your idea (or questions for Pipeline's Q&A section), including your name, a brief summary of your feature and a possible logline to stories@pipelineartists.com. If you have published clips, please include a link. Attach text or Word files but not PDFs. The more original and more ambitious your ideas, the better. Payment is between $75 and $300 US per accepted piece.

Keep in mind that the purpose of Pipeline is to inspire artists. You are strongly advised to read several articles on the site before sending a pitch. No screenplays, comic book or novel submissions. Full guidelines at: **https://pipelineartists.com/submission-guidelines/**

Celebrating Shelagh Delaney

SALFORD ARTS THEATRE
TRANSFORMING PERFORMANCE

Salford Arts Theatre has been celebrating the life and work of Salford born Shelagh Delaney since 2014 and is now in its second year of supporting new writing with the Shelagh Delaney New Writing Award, *writes Jenny Roche*.

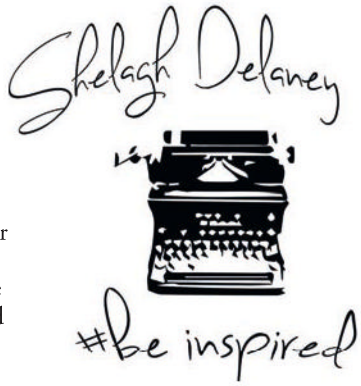
Original and new plays for theatre are invited from playwrights who identify as female and live in, or are from, Greater Manchester. The winning writer will receive £3,000, see their play fully produced and performed and also gain support and mentorship

Finished plays should be a minimum of 60 minutes. In the first instance you may submit a first draft, a finished script or a minimum of the first 15 pages. You must hold all copyright and other related rights to your play and it must not be 'connected, contracted or committed to any other venue, creative team or producer'. It should also not have had any previous productions or any upcoming productions.

Email your piece as a PDF document and in the body of the email include a brief synopsis of your play, your name, age and where you are based. Include also a maximum 500-word bio with your full contact details and any previous experience you may have.

The closing date for submissions is 3 April 2023. A shortlist will be announced 24 April 2023 and the winner in May 2023. The winning play will be performed at Salford Arts Theatre in November 2023.

Website: www.salfordartstheatre.com/shelagh-delaney-award



Pointers for Five Points

Five Points is the tri-annual journal published by the Georgia State University Department of English, and each issue features poetry, fiction, essays, and 'interviews with the most compelling writers working today,' writes *PDR Lindsay-Salmon*.

Open for general submissions until 30 April, *Five Points* invites submissions of fiction, poetry, flash fiction and non-fiction, and literary non-fiction. Read what's publishedonline, each issue in the archives has a few available items and follow those detailed guidelines.

Submit essays, under 7,500 words, which are thoughtful, knowledgeable yet entertaining. Fiction under 7,500 words, needs to demonstrate story telling skills, writerly skills and leave an impression. Flash fiction and non-fiction, no more than 500 words, is welcome too. For poetry send 1 to 3 poems, no longer than 50 lines.

Submit online and include a cover letter.

Website: http://fivepoints.gsu.edu

INTERNATIONAL ZINE SCENE

PDR Lindsay-Salmon

thegoodlife review

The Good Life Review is a quarterly online literary journal 'committed to exploring the overlooked.' Submit poetry, short fiction, flash fiction, micro fiction, short creative nonfiction (cnf,) flash cnf, micro cnf, stage and screen plays, and 'any of the aforementioned translated from Spanish to English, with the original author's permission.' For the 'mostly' weekly blog, 'the Buzz', submit one piece of original micro pros or a short poem. Fiction and cnf, no more than 500 words please and a poem around a page. Submissions for 'Micro Mondays' will open shortly for 'brief fiction, cnf, and poetry'. Artwork is always wanted for the blog and the main journal. Payment is US$25 to US$55 for each published piece. *TGLF* also holds an annual Honeybee Prize with a sizeable money prize sent via PayPal, publication of the winners, and 'a jar of honey from a Midwest apiary.' Runners-up receive US$75 via PayPal and publication. The deadline is 1 May.

Website: thegoodlifereview.com

MudRoom

MudRoom Mag invites prose and poetry plus other content which 'engages with writing communities – interviews with authors, and reviews of new collections.' Send 3 to 5 original, previously unpublished poems in a single .doc/.docx .odt or pdf file with one poem per page and no more than eight pages. Fiction, essays, and essays in translation are accepted up to 6,000 words. Include a brief cover letter with a third-person bio in the body of the email.

Payment is US$15 via PayPal for First North American Serial Rights.

Website: www.mudroommag.com

THE FURIOUS GAZELLE

Literary as hell.

The Furious Gazelle publishes 'short fiction, micro fiction, poetry, short plays, novel excerpts, and creative non-fiction.' For poetry submit up to 5 pages. For prose, both fiction and nonfiction keep the work under 7,000 words. For flash prose, submit no more than 5 individual pieces in one submission. For plays limit the work to 20 pages per submission. Submit work by email. Standard publishing format is usual but the team are 'flexible' as long as it is clear and easy to read. Plays should be in standard play format. Submissions for the Things that Make Us Furious column may be satirical essays, listicles, rants.

Website: https://thefuriousgazelle.com

Zooscape

an e-zine of fantastic furry fiction

The editorial team at *Zooscape* love 'fantastic furry fiction.' They want stories about 'animals which can talk, magic flows, and the stars are in reach.' Furry fiction is a genre found under the speculative fiction umbrella and may be either science-fiction or fantasy. Published three times a year, submit original stories, no more than 5,000 words. Reprint stories may be up to 10,000 words. An anthropomorphic animal figure should be the main feature in the story. Payment is US8 cents per word for original fiction and US$20 for reprints.

Website: https://zooscape-zine.com

Slackjaw

The editorial team at *Slackjaw* want writing that makes them and their readers laugh. The team publish daily humour on Medium and are always seeking writers. Submissions under 1,000 words are preferred, around 300 to 800 words is usual, of 'premise-driven humour pieces, humorous essays, and a bit of short comedic fiction' but not 'fake-news/Onion-style pieces.' The team also like illustrated and cartoon pieces.

Payment for accepted pieces is via Medium's partner program (free to join, some eligibility criteria apply).

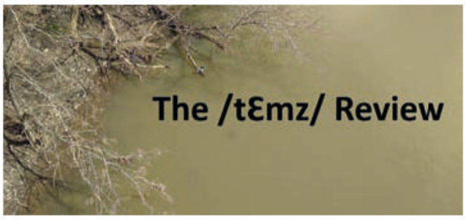
Website: https://medium.com/slackjaw

ATTICUS REVIEW

Fiction | Nonfiction | Poetry | Mixed Media | Reviews

Atticus Review is now a triannual publication that invites submissions of bold creative nonfiction, including from New Voices, ie those with less than five publications across all genres. Submit creative nonfiction no more than 3,000 words. For flash CNF, under 800 words, writers may submit up to three pieces. Mixed media submissions are welcomed

Website: https://atticusreview.org



The /tƐmz/ Review is a literary journal published by an editorial team based in London, Ontario. It publishes fiction, poetry, and reviews quarterly and seek submissions 'from a diverse range of emerging and established voices.' For prose, submit fiction and creative non-fiction, no more than 10,000 words, or flash, under 1,000 words, should be 'innovative' 'strange, experimental and boundary-pushing.' For poetry, send up to 8 poems, under 10 pages in total. Payment is CAN$20 per batch of poems and CAN$20 per prose piece.

Website: https://www.thetemzreview.com

babyteeth

Baby Teeth Journal is an Australian journal that is a 'queer, inclusive, and anti-racist organisation with a focus on local queer and emerging creators.' Currently open to submissions of memoir, fiction, poetry and multi media work. Submit up to 12 pages of poetry; prose, no more than 2,500 words; scripts, no more than 15 pages, must be a fully contained scene or short complete play. Visual and digital art, photography, comics, visual poetry and audio and spoken word are also welcome. Payment is 'a flat rate AUD$25.'

Website: www.babyteethjournal.com

FLASHES

Juliet Annan, who founded Penguin Random House imprint Fig Tree in 2005, is to become publishing director at Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

Aamina Ahmad was presented with the Best First Novel Award for her debut *The Return of Faroz Ali* at the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Awards 2022.

According to research carried out by Oxford University Press, the word of the year as chosen by children across the UK is 'Queen'. The second and third-paced children's choices are 'happy' and 'chaos'.

Feminist Book Fortnight, which returned in 2022 after a two-year gap during the pandemic, has announced that it will no longer be taking place.

I don't actually think it's possible for a writer to look too hard at other people, noticing how they express, explain and even betray themselves with dress and attitude and speech and gesture.
Joanna Trollope

Put the pen to paper or your fingers to the keys and just start. Start now. Start today. Okay, maybe get a cup of coffee first – and maybe make make some kind of outline or plan.
Holly Black

INTERNATIONAL ROMANCE MARKET

A fresh take on romance

Jenny Roche

sourcebooks casablanca

Casablanca is an imprint of Source Books and is looking for submissions from writers 'whose stories have something fresh to offer in the genre of Romance'. All subgenres are welcome including the paranormal, contemporary, erotic, romantic suspense and historical romance prior to 1900.

Their required criteria for romantic fiction is that a world is created with a 'protagonist the reader can connect to emotionally and a love interest the reader can fall in love with'.

Submissions should be a completed manuscript of 85,000-100,000 words formatted in a Word document. In the header or footer include your book title, the page numbers and full contact information for yourself or your agent.

In a query letter include the title and word count of your book, a 2/3-page synopsis that includes the ending of your story and a 2/3-sentence hook that will help sell the book. Include a brief bio with a note on any previous book publication you may have with information on sales history and any awards and contests won. The publisher is looking for writers with a 'career arc' so include a paragraph or two on how your book might progress to a duo, trilogy or series.

Website: https://read.sourcebooks.com/submissions-casablanca.html

Short story, big prize

BBC National Short Story Award 2023 with Cambridge University

BBC National Short Story Award 2023 is inviting entries. The competition for stories up to 8,000 words has a £15,000 first prize.

A further four shortlisted entrants will each receive £600. The five winning stories will be published in an anthology. This year's judges are Reeta Chakrabarti (Chair), Jessie Burton, Roddy Doyle, Okechukwu Nzelu and Di Spiers.

To enter the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University, submit original fiction no longer than 8,000 words. Writers entering the BBC NSSA must have a previous record of publication of creative writing in the UK.

Entry is free. Each writer may enter only one story.

The closing date is 13 March.

Website: https://writ.rs/bbcnssa23

A stream of words

SP SLIPSTREAM POETS

Slipstream Poets Open Poetry Competition 2023 is inviting entries of poetry on any theme, up to 60 lines.

There is a first prize of £300, a second prize of £150 and a third prize of £75. There is an additional prize of £50 and the Jim Johnston 'Chactonbury Cup' for the best entry by a West Sussex poet. Winning poems will be published online, and winners and commended poets will be invited to read their poems at a presentation event.

Enter original, unpublished poems up to 60 lines.

The entry fee is £5 for the first poem and £3.50 for each additional poem.

The closing date is 28 February.

Website: www.slipstream-poets.co.uk/competition/

Poetry business class

THE 2023 INTERNATIONAL BOOK & PAMPHLET Competition

Deadline: Wednesday 1st March 2023

Prizes: See below for more details

Judged by Hannah Lowe

The Poetry Business is welcoming entries for its prestigious International Book and Pamphlet Competition 2023.

Now in its 37th year, The Poetry Business's International Book and Pamphlet Competition is inviting submissions for this year's prize. Two winning collections will be developed and published by The Poetry Business's imprint, Smith|Doorstop Books, as a 28-page pamphlet. Winners will also be offered the opportunity to submit a full-length manuscript. Each winner will also receive £700, publication in *The North* magazine, a reading at the Wordsworth Trust and a place on a writing course at Moniack Mhor. Six runners up will each be published in *The North* and receive £100. This year's judge is Hannah Lowe.

To enter, send 20 pages of poetry.

The full-price entry fee is £29.

The closing date is 1 March.

Website: https://poetrybusiness.co.uk/competitions/the-international-book-pamphlet-competition/

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL MARKET

Hope springs for writers

PDR Lindsay-Salmon

WILLOW SPRINGS
PROSE POETRY INTERVIEWS
ISSUE 90
JOAN MURRAY TRIIN PAJA
DAVID AXELROD ANCA FODOR

Willow Springs is the journal produced within the MFA programme at Eastern Washington University. The editorial team of students and professors are proud to 'publish the finest in contemporary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as interviews with notable authors'. Published twice a year, Willow Springs aims to engage readers 'in an ongoing discussion of art, ideas, and the human experience'.

Currently open to submissions of fiction and poetry until the 31st of May, non-fiction subs are open year-round.

Only submit one packet of work at a time and wait for a response before submitting again. Send 'writing that surprises and moves... takes hold from the first sentence and doesn't let go'.

Open to beginners and experts, the editiorial team 'encourage work from writers of every nationality, race, religion, sexuality and gender, including writers with disabilities, writers who are not affiliated with an MFA program, and writers whose perspectives and experiences are often underrepresented in the literary world'.

Poets may submit up to 5 poems per submission. Fiction may be flash or full length. Short prose, three pieces of no more than 750 words, are accepted. Nonfiction may include up to 3 pieces in a single word document.

Payment: US$100 per published long-form prose piece, US$40 for short prose and US$20 per published poem plus two comp copies.

Website: https://inside.ewu.edu/willowspringsmagazine

Binsted Arts

READY FOR BINSTED?

The Binsted Prize 2023 from the South Downs Poetry Festival Competition is inviting entries.

The annual Binsted Prize is given for original, unpublished poems on any theme.

There are prizes of £300, £150 and £50. This year's judge is Wendy Klein. The winning poem will be published in the South Downs Poetry Festival magazine *Poetry & All That Jazz*. Winners and commended poets will be invited to read their poems at an event at Binstead Church near Arundel in June.

The entry fee is £5 for the first poem and £4 for any subsequent poems. Poets aged 16-25 can enter for £5 per poem.

The closing date is 15 April.

Website: https://www.binsted.org/poetry-comp-23

TRAVEL WRITING KNOW-HOW

Beware, be warned

The hazards of travel are well worth writing about, says **Patrick Forsyth**

When it comes to flying, I am a nervous passenger but a confident drinker and valium-swallower. This was said by the novelist Martin Amis, and though many people fear flying it is, in fact, statistically one of the safest ways to travel. Indeed, all travelling, by whatever means, is not without its dangers. Hazards can be many and various and range from the need to avoid drinking the water in some countries to keeping your valuables safe in hotels and avoiding being scammed by everything from time-share salespeople in Spain to tuk-tuk drivers in Thailand. The consequences of falling foul of some danger may range from mild upset (literally in terms of eating the wrong thing) to taxing your travel insurance to the limit as you have to take an emergency flight home with a serious injury.

That said, while writing to warn people of potential dangers may not be as satisfying in some ways as pointing out the joys of travel, helping people avoid dangers is useful. And there are many different dangers to warn about. Perhaps to create interesting writing you need to find unusual dangers. For example, I recently experienced one I'd not considered before when my credit card stopped working. Phoning the bank, I found an inefficient and unhelpful procedure, totally unsuited to dealing across the world, which resulted in me running up a bill of more than £300 in phone calls before my card was made to work again. That was not the end of it as, when I complained, I was then told that 'we have a maximum of eight weeks' to reply, and already I have had two messages saying it will take 'longer than expected'. So far, thanks for nothing Virgin Money (which incidentally refused to comment on the reason for the delay for this article; one assumes they must be overburdened with complaints).

The point is that this is a hazard that I had not previously experienced and thus one about which other people might appreciate being forewarned. So too with many a potential hazard. Dangers may lurk in the business of travelling itself, in particular locations (from countries to hotels) or holiday activities from eating to extreme sports. You may find examples anywhere, either yourself or though other peoples' experience. Perhaps more likely in far-flung places, there are doubtless things people would want to avoid that also occur closer to home – consider how many people are apparently unaware of the real danger of walking close to the edge of chalk cliffs. This is another rich seam for the travel writer and perhaps less likely to come to mind than more positive topics.

INTERNATIONAL NONFICTION MARKET

Women's work force

PDR Lindsay-Salmon

The Women's Writing Workshop will be publishing a series of themed creative nonfiction anthologies starting in 2023.

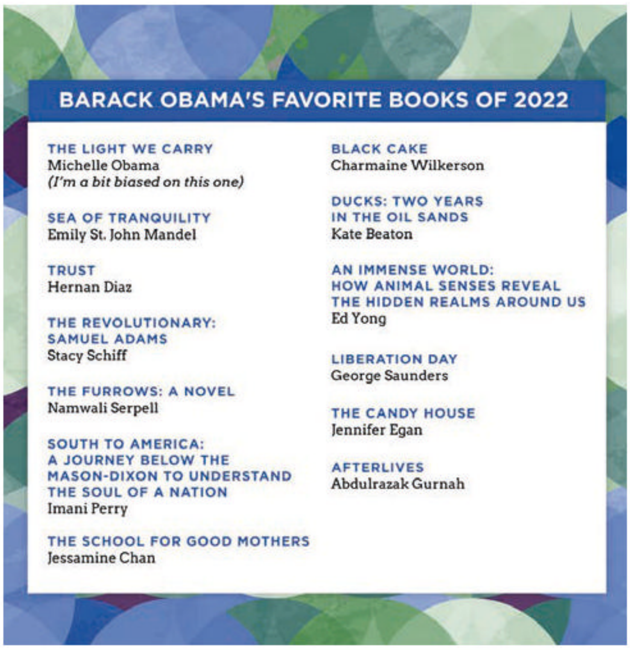
The submissions are open to all women and the theme of the first anthology is 'Toxic Workplaces'. The team want stories with meaning but not necessarily to 'confront issues of gender, sexual harassment, patriarchy, etc'. Essays are welcome and 'may be politically conscious, but please avoid didactic writing and polemics'. Give them 'a strong, relatable voice, engaging narrative, and thoughtful reflection'. Prose, 1,300 to 6,500 words, should be pasted into the body of an email, along with a brief bio. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable but not reprints or multiple subs.

The closing date is 1 March. Response is 'within 1 month, but often sooner'. Payment is US$0.02/word.

Website: www.cynthialewisauthor.com/p/anthology.html

Presidential library

President Obama released his list of his favourite books of 2022 just before Christmas, *writes Gary Dalkin*. The thirteen titles were, **Fiction:** *Sea of Tranquillity*, Emily St. John Mandel; *Trust*, Hernan Diaz; *The Furrows: A Novel*, Namwali Serpell; *The School for Good Mothers*, Jessamine Chan; *Black Cake*, Charmaine Wilkerson; *Liberation Day*, George Saunders; *The Candy House*, Jennifer Egan; *Afterlives*, Abdulrazak Gurnah. **Nonfiction:** *The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times*, Michelle Obama; *The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams,* Stacy Schiff; *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*, Imani Perry; *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, Kate Beaton; *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us*, Ed Yong.



BARACK OBAMA'S FAVORITE BOOKS OF 2022

THE LIGHT WE CARRY
Michelle Obama
(I'm a bit biased on this one)

SEA OF TRANQUILITY
Emily St. John Mandel

TRUST
Hernan Diaz

THE REVOLUTIONARY: SAMUEL ADAMS
Stacy Schiff

THE FURROWS: A NOVEL
Namwali Serpell

SOUTH TO AMERICA: A JOURNEY BELOW THE MASON-DIXON TO UNDERSTAND THE SOUL OF A NATION
Imani Perry

THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD MOTHERS
Jessamine Chan

BLACK CAKE
Charmaine Wilkerson

DUCKS: TWO YEARS IN THE OIL SANDS
Kate Beaton

AN IMMENSE WORLD: HOW ANIMAL SENSES REVEAL THE HIDDEN REALMS AROUND US
Ed Yong

LIBERATION DAY
George Saunders

THE CANDY HOUSE
Jennifer Egan

AFTERLIVES
Abdulrazak Gurnah

DEBORAH ROGERS FOUNDATION
Supporting emerging talent in the literary world

Rewarding prose

The DRF Writers Award 2023 for first-time prose writers has a £10,000 prize.

The DRF Writers Award from the Deborah Rogers Foundation for writers within the British Commonwealth and Eire invites submissions of 15,000-20,000 words of a work in progress, which may be fiction or nonfiction, by debut authors. To be eligible, writers must not previously have published or self-published a full-length prose book, and must not be agented or under contract to a publisher. Entrants may have published a poetry collection.

The winner will receive £10,000 and each runner up will receive £1,000. This years judges are Abdulrazak Gurnah (Chair), Claire Adam and Annalena McAfee.

Include a synopsis and brief biographical note with each entry.

The closing date is 31 March.

Website: www.deborahrogersfoundation.org/writers-award

Worth an essay

The Fitzcarraldo Editions/Mahler & Lewitt Studios Essay Prize 2023 is inviting entries.

The competition is for proposals for book-length essays (minimum 25,000 words) by unpublished writers in the UK and Ireland.

The winner will receive £3,000 as an advance against publication by Fitzcarraldo Editions. The winner will also have the opportunity to spend up to two months in residency at the Mahler & Lewitt Studios in Spoleto. Italy. This year's prize will be judged by a committee comprised of Joanna Briggs, Brian Dillon, Joanna Kavenna, Max Porter and Jacques Testard.

Submit a proposal up to 5,000 words outlining the subject matter, scope, style and structure of the proposed essay. A writing sample up to 5,000 words may also be included.

Entry is free.

The closing date is 13 March.

Website: https://fitzcarraldoeditions.com/prizes/essay-prize

Win your way to Swanwick Writers' Summer School

Swanwick Writers' Summer School is a week-long programme for writers of all ages, abilities and genres and you could win a place worth £680 in our 2023 Writing Competition.

This year there are three categories for writing on this year's theme of '**motivation**'.

- Short Story: up to 1,000 words
- Poetry: up to 40 lines
- Children: up to 1,000 words

Enter online https://www.writers-online.co.uk/writing-competitions/open-competitions/

Entry is £7.50 and £5 for subscribers. Post your entry using the competition coupon within the magazine (see p77)

OPEN SHORT STORY WINNER: HOLIDAY

Taylor's Notebook

by Charlie Baudry

Charlie Baudry is passionate about writing for children and adults. Her work has been published in magazines and shortlisted for a couple of competitions. Originally from the UK, Charlie has spent most of her life travelling. She is currently in South America as she works on a Middle-Grade novel as well as more short stories.

Had Taylor sat here, or over there? I glance round the café. Mats on the floor, low tables, bamboo walls. Succulents flow from hanging baskets, swaying in the warm breeze from the open terrace. The air is thick with rice, fried oil and the sweet butterfly pea tea that has just arrived beside me.

Her notebook sits on my lap. Taylor's. It's scuffed at the edges. The vibrant silver pattern swirled on its cover has faded to a dull grey from being repeatedly stuffed into a rucksack, I imagine.

It's been here every day since I arrived. I was nervous at first, not wanting to pry. Wouldn't it be like opening her heart and reading everything that was etched on it? Everything she didn't want anyone else to see?

I flicked through the pages, trying to look like they didn't really hold any interest, nervous that Taylor could return at any moment to claim it. Those early days I only noticed the notes scribbled on the cover and down the margins.

'BHK 16.45pm flight BK370'

Thomas –rm 29

Drinks with Shell @7

The Grey Bar

Turn left on Mum Mueang soi3

None of them linked, scrawled wherever the pen landed.

She liked to draw. Sketches of jewelry, gemstones, and constellations dotted the pages.

When I began reading I started at the back. I like knowing the outcome.

'Things to pack:

Plug adapter

Bug spray

Pepper spray'

Pepper Spray. My stomach churned. I'd been travelling for years and had never packed any.

I closed the book straight away, not wanting to know. None of it was my business.

The next day, I came back for my tea. The notebook still in its place, discarded on the rickety old book shelf alongside out of date travel guides and tatty paperbacks by Paul Theroux and Agatha Christie.

I didn't want to read it, but it niggled my mind, relentlessly. With a steadying breath I started at the beginning, where the handwriting was neater.

She landed on the KhaoSan Road on February 22nd.

'I can't describe it. I thought I could, but I don't have the words. KSR is bigger than me, brighter than me, MORE than I've ever known. Home did NOT prepare me for this. Liz, I met her in the dorm, day 1. She's 24-ish, an Aussie and has travelled everywhere. She showed me her tattoo, done by Cambodian monks. She held my hand all the way as we walked, I gripped tighter than I thought possible, so tight I swear my knuckles turned white. She didn't say anything. She pushed through the crowds, taking us to this little spring roll stall, not one on the main strip, but down an alley. We sat on small plastic chairs. It doesn't feel real that I'm here, doing this, now. Years of planning, of nearly backing out and staying put. Not wanting to leave Dylan. And now I'm here, eating spring rolls with a tattooed Australian.'

In the early pages Taylor mentions food, a lot; mango sticky rice, coconut water. She can't get enough of papaya salad and prefers Khao Soi to Pad Thai. She suffers two days of stomach upset. She thought she would die. Liz brought her water, hydrating pills, mopped her brow, things like that.

She misses more days which makes my heart skip, but she always returns. Usually she's been busy, meeting people, drinking. Once, she disappeared for three days, I held my breath for her return.

'Liz is going to Laos. I'm not ready for her to leave me, but I'm not ready to leave Thailand. I haven't even seen the islands yet. Can I visit Thailand and not go to the islands? I've made Liz promise to stay in touch.'

I want to tell Taylor that I've lived in Thailand and haven't been to the islands either, it's okay not to. Travel isn't about the sights, is it? Why stay for an island when you could follow Liz?

'She left. I hid my trembling hands as she said goodbye. Her skin smelt of Pawpaw Ointment. It lingered on my lips after I kissed her cheek. I'm scared of her going. She says we'll probably meet up in some small Malaysian mountain town—that's the way with Asia—she laughed. I hope she's right as she refuses to give me any way to get in touch with her. She must have an email, mustn't she? Even though she says she doesn't. I didn't notice at first, but she doesn't have a phone or camera or anything. Does she want to stay in touch with me as much as I do her? This isn't like Anna. Liz is different. I can feel it when she looks at me. It's like she's calling me, but with her heart."

Taylor scribbled out and rewrote those last lines. Was she looking for the right words? Maybe she didn't want to write them at all. The pain of all the hurt and joy that words can't possibly describe. Perhaps her own thoughts frightened her. I think of Liz, someone who draws you in but leaves you battered and alone. More like a nightmare.

'Liz has been gone for three days and Bangkok has lost the glitter I thought it had. I see through the flashy lights to the scaffolding holding the place up and the sweat and stench of all the people as they squash together. I want to escape, to breathe once again. Liz has taken the air with her. Axel says there's room in the van, I can leave tomorrow. Last night I went back for spring rolls. I thought I saw her there. Sitting on the same stool, her back to me. Her top hung loose on her bare back. I'm sure I saw her tattoo, just at the nape. It couldn't be. She's gone. It was too dark. It can't have been her. I went straight back to the room and packed. Axel was in his usual place at the bar. I gave him a thumbs up. Leaving tomorrow.'

I drink my tea. A gecko scurries past my stretched out legs, heading for the safety of the darkest corners. I skim the next few entries. She's travelling. She's seeing sights. The White Temple in Chiang Rai, she describes as 'all the B's' —I can only guess—Bizarre? Beautiful? Bonkers? Brash? Boring? What words would a young woman use? Probably not bonkers and we're loathe to describe anything as boring. Boredom is unmentionable—no one dare say that travel can be boring.

She's meeting people, pages full of names, hostels, dates. But Liz isn't there.

Taylor's been in Pai, sleeping in a cabin by the river. My heart aches at the sadness I know she's feeling. Every time she arrives in a new town, turns a corner, walks into a bar, she'll have a whisper of hope. She'll ignore it, but it's there, and everything else will be dimmed by it. Liz took the light and left everything else in shadows.

'Back in BK, leaving Thailand. I didn't get to the islands, not once. Does that make me a failure? Everyone says, 'oh you must go to Koa Phangan' but I'm going to Cambodia. The flight's booked. I wanted to go to Laos. But I didn't. Why not? Did I think Liz would be there waiting for me? Is it that easy?'

I wish I could answer her that, yes. It could be that easy.

There are more flights scribbled, hotels, bus timetables. I turn the book upside down, on its side. Life isn't linear and neither is the way Taylor writes in her notebook.

'Last few days in Thailand. Went to the shopping mall. Hardly exotic, is it? I should be climbing mountains, visiting temples, photographing monkeys swinging from the banyans. The mall is much better than the one back home. There's chocolate waffles in the food court. It's a long way from the spring roll stall on KSR, though. I'm in a different Thailand here. Not the one in the guide books.

Matt gave me directions to get the Sak Yant. There's rituals to it, it isn't just a tattoo, it's more than that. I don't know, it looked good on Liz. Is that why I want it? I've got to stay up all night, check in at 2.30am. Matt said he'll come with me. Liz said we'd meet in some Malaysian town, serendipity, is that the word? What about Siem Reap? She could be there, couldn't she?'

I imagine them walking around Angkor Watt, an accidental meeting on temple steps. Perhaps sheltering from the rain in a Bia Hoi, down a narrow street in old Hanoi. Small, plastic stools and icy beer.

I turn the last pages, no thoughts, no yearnings clutter the final words, just a list and a flight to catch.

I glance up as the door swings open and my heart skips, could it be Taylor, finally returning for her book? I feel foolish as a group of young people enter, a swarm of elephant pants and beaded wrists. They gather around a low table, ordering watermelon smoothies.

She left a long time ago, but the notebook stayed. Perhaps she was too sleepy as she left in a rush. Final drinks with Matt, that last potent Chang beer and a forgotten book. Maybe she needed to leave all trace of Liz behind.

We sat in the same space. Breathed the same tang of Thai air. Was she back in the small town she'd grown up in or was she still roaming?

A moto honks, dust flies up, as two helmeted girls drive past. The one at the back, her arms wrapped round the driver's waist.

I glance down at the book, leaving it behind as I step into the bustling street, full of people, travels, stories and dreams. Content that there is no finish, no happy ending, just endless possibilities.

RUNNER UP AND SHORTLISTED:

Runner up: **Rosy Adams**, Trefechan, Aberystwyth.

Also shortlisted in *WM*'s Holiday short story competition were: **Phil Gilvin**, Swindon; **Linda Jenner**, Beverley, East Yorks; **Deborah Hugill**, Northallerton, North Yorks; **Lindsay Hurst**, Perthshire; **Linda Sainty**, Bristol; **Michael Callaghan**, Glasgow; **Catherine Proctor**, Kendal; **Veronica Swinburne**, Bolton; **Dominic Bell**, Hull; **Tracy Turner-Jones**, London.

FIRST PERSON SHORT STORY

Wandering

BY DAVID HOBSON

FIRST PLACE £200

David Hobson now resides in BC, Canada, but he grew up in Lancashire. He is a life-long, avid reader and has always had an interest in writing. Once he retired he decided to get more serious in the task and has self-published a non-fiction and a children's fiction book. However it was only after completing a *WM* Short Story Course that he decided to experiment with different genres. He is delighted and amazed with this first contest win.

I wandered lonely as a cloud o'er vales and hills and the odd stream and a couple of stiles plus through a five-barred gate and not to mention, stubbing me toe on a stone which I thought were loose when I kicked it, but it wasn't. Anyway, I don't know what that bloke was on about 'cos I aint seen no bloomin' daffodils. Maybe it's because it's June and they've all died off or sommat. I dunno.

Whatever. I don't suppose it matters about seeing daffodils. I'm just enjoying the walk. Well, when I say enjoying, what I actually mean is that, I'm not disliking it. To be honest, I'm not really taking in all the beautiful countryside or appreciating the scenery as I normally do. I'm just wandering. Walking anywhere to get me mind off her and out o' me life.

Two hours ago we'd been having lunch in that lovely hotel restaurant down by the lake, when she suddenly says that she doesn't want to keep seeing me. Well, I were that surprised I nearly spilled me tea. I thought she were gonna come out with one of them 'It's not you, it's me' speeches, but she didn't. She said it were me. Told me I was too boring for her. Said she wanted a bloke with a bit more excitement.

I thought she were interested in me stamp collection and all me old Big Band 78rpm records. That gramophone's worth a lot of money, I'd told her. Apparently, not even our Friday night visits to the fish and chip shop had held her attention.

It turns out that she'd been wooed by Big Stuart and his motorbike. Him of the leather jacket, tattoos, beard and nose ring. Apparently, he'd taken her for a ride and she felt exhilarated with 500cc throbbing between her legs. Too much competition for my old 50cc Vespa.

We'd been dating (if you can call it that) for seven months, two weeks and three days and, in all that time we'd only kissed 23 times. That's less than once a week. I'd tried to get a bit more amorous once, but that ended in disaster when me mother burst into the living room and asked if we wanted a cup of cocoa. That seemed to put a kibosh on proceedings and she said she'd better go home 'cos it were getting late. So, I walked her to the bus stop. The Vespa was in the garage being repaired.

I didn't see her for a week after that and, when I did, I tried to apologize and offered to take her to the pictures. She agreed to go but was too busy eating her popcorn to let me put me arm around her or anything. What I didn't know then, but found out later, was that she'd already met Big Stuart and got her leg over his Kawasaki.

So, here I am, wandering lonely as a wottsit and wondering what comes next. I'm glad I took that last scone off the plate and brought it with me. I'd paid for it after all and, it was too good to waste. Just a pity I couldn't have put the jam and cream on first. Never mind, it's still yummy.

I've no idea where I'm going but the path I'm on looks well used and, importantly, it doesn't look too steep either. I don't mind walking, in fact I quite like it and did think about joining a rambling

club once. What put me off was the thought of having to talk to lots of strange people during the ramble. I'm not one for socializing much; I prefer me own company and just drifting off into me own imaginations. I do like to listen to music though. Classical mostly. I've got quite a few good tapes that I play on me Walkman when I go on a walk. Usually. But I forgot to bring it today. On account of having lunch with her. I didn't expect to be walking.

On I plod for about an hour, thinking of all sorts. I don't think too deeply when I walk 'cos I just like to listen to me music and admire the scenery.But today I'm thinking. Mostly about what I'm going to do next now that I don't have to consider her. I'll just get on with me work and concentrate on doing a good job. There's a possibility of a promotion in the next six months 'cos the boss keeps hinting at it. Mind you, there'll be a lot of competition in the office and I'm not exactly one of the hot favourites.

I wonder if the boss'll choose Mary. She's nice and gets on well with everyone. She even smiles at me sometimes. Yes, Mary. She's a really good worker and always meets her targets. I'll bet she'll get the promotion. Or Gerry. He's another one. Doesn't like me much but he's always sucking up to the boss. Smarmy git. Posh suits and gelled hair. Well, if he gets it, at least he'll be out of the office a lot more. Good thing too.

It's the Craft and Hobbies Fair next month. There'll be lots of stamp traders there so I could get them to look at me collection. I wonder if there'll be anybody selling 78rpm records. I'll have to find out 'cos I wouldn't mind trading some of mine for new ones.

Me feet seem to have brought me to familiar ground. It looks like I've come back into the village, only at the other end. I must have gone round in a circle. Still lots of people milling around, so it mustn't be time for the buses to leave yet. The place gets a lot quieter when all the tourists and day-trippers go home. I've always liked coming here whatever the time of year. It gets packed in Summer, obviously, but there's still quite a few about in Spring and Autumn. In Winter it gets too cold for visitors, but I don't mind coming and just enjoying the views of the lake from the café.

Here is a Sea of Tranquility for me; not the Moon one, just a haven of peace and quiet where I can get away from the bustle of town and tensions of the office. Now she's not gonna be around I can get back to just pleasing me, myself and I. Tomorrow I'll be back in the grind; the frenetic world of insurance. All those ledgers, policies and computer printouts. I can't wait. Well, actually, I can.

Just one more stroll around the village before I go back to me little flat over the bakery, and me mother. No, I don't want to buy any postcards, Beatrix Potter souvenirs, books, Kendal Mint Cake, or outdoor adventure wear, thank you very much. I've seen 'em all a million times before but they still give me pleasure as I watch tourists ooh-ing and aah-ing over everything. Of course, the shopkeepers couldn't do without them. But I'm not a tourist. I'm just a sad frump, dumped by a girl who thought I was too boring.

I suppose I should find me Vespa and go home. But maybe another drink before I go. Another cup of tea or, maybe I should drown me sorrows with a pint of bitter in the pub. Two things aid my decision. One, I don't drink alcohol. Two, I'm driving, well riding, technically. So back to the tea shop for a cuppa. And maybe a chocolate éclair.

I stroll through the village to my favourite tea shop, overlooking the lake and three doors down from the hotel where she'd given me the bad news earlier. To get there, I had to pass a pub called the Rose and Crown. No, I wasn't giving in and going in. I was sticking to me principles. But there, parked in front of the hostelry was something that stopped me in me tracks. Was that what I thought it was? I stepped forward to get a better look. Yes, a Kawasaki 500cc.

So, she'd not only dumped me, but gone straight off with him only minutes later. Well, that just let me know the type of girl she really was and how lucky I'd been to escape from her. At least, that's what I was telling myself. Inside, I still felt the pain, the humiliation, the anger. This called for drastic action. I'll teach her to make a fool of me. I'll teach her that she can't trifle with my affections. I'm not going to let her bring me down. I can get over her just like that and I can prove it. Not only would I have a chocolate éclair but a custard slice as well. And a pot of tea, not just a cup.

Tomorrow, it would be back to the boredom, but today I was going to celebrate the return of my freedom and my sanity. And to her I say, good riddance.

RUNNER UP AND SHORTLISTED: Runner up: **Terry Baldock**, Ashton under Hill, Evesham. Also shortlisted in *WM*'s First Person competition were: **Andrew Hutchcraft**, Peterborough; **Damien McKeating**, Newcastle-under-Lyme; **Karmen Spiljak**, Belgrade, Serbia; **Georgina Edwards**, Shrewsbury; **Kathy Schilbach**, Lancing, W Sussex; **Chris Bennett**, Lindfield, W Sussex; **Michael Callaghan**, Glasgow; **Jane Bidder**, Paignton; **Dominic Bel**l, Hull; **Rodica Tudorana**, Reading.

COMPETITION LAUNCHES AND RULES

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OPEN: **JOURNEY**

£250 to be won. The winner will receive £200 and the runner up £50, with publication for both entries.
Write about a journey this month but what that means is up to you – and, for a change, this comp is open to both fiction and non-fiction.
1,500-1,700 words.
The closing date is 15 April.
Ref code: Mar23/journey

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY: **HUMOUR**

£125 to be won. The winner will receive £100 and the runner up £25, with publication for both entries. Make us laugh this month as we ask you to create a humorous short story. Any style or genre, 1,500-1,700 words.
The closing date is 15 April.
Ref code: Mar23/humour

STILL TIME TO ENTER:

OPEN: 750-WORD SHORT FICTION COMPETITION

For creative writing in any style or genre up to 750 words.
Prizes £200/£50 and publication.
Entry fee £7.50, £5 for subscribers.
Closing date 15 March
Ref code: Feb23/750

POETRY: LEWIS CARROLL

Celebrate the Alice in Wonderland author in verse up to 40 lines.
Prizes £100/£50
Entry fee £7.50/£5 subscribers.
Closing date 15 March
Ref code: Feb23/lewis

How to enter

WM Competition Rules

1 Eligibility
All entries must be the original and unpublished work of the entrant, and not currently submitted for publication nor for any other competition or award. Each entry must be accompanied by an entry form, printed here (photocopies are acceptable), unless stated. ***Open Competitions*** are open to any writer, who can submit as many entries as they choose. Entry fees are £7.50, £5 for subscribers. ***Subscriber-only Competitions*** are open only to subscribers of *Writing Magazine*. Entry is free but you can only submit one entry per competition.

2 Entry Fees
Cheques or postal orders should be payable to Warners Group Publications or you can pay by credit card (see form).

3 Manuscripts
Short stories: Entries must be typed in double spacing on single sides of A4 paper with a front page stating your name, address, phone number and email address, your story title, word count and the name of the competition. Entries will be returned if accompanied by sae. Electronic entries should be a single doc, docx, txt, rtf or pdf file with the contact details, etc, on p1, and your story commencing on the second page.
Poetry manuscripts: Entries must be typed in single spacing with double spacing between stanzas on single sides of A4. Entrant's name, address, telephone number and email address must be typed on a separate A4 sheet. Entries to poetry competitions cannot be returned. Electronic entries should be a single doc, docx, txt, rtf, odt or pdf file with the contact details, etc, on p1, and your poem on the second page.
All manuscripts: Receipt of entries will be acknowledged if accompanied by a suitably worded stamped and addressed postcard. Entrants retain copyright in their manuscripts. You are advised not to send the only copy of your manuscript. Enclose an sae if you want your manuscript to be returned.

4 Competition Judging
Competition judges will be appointed by *Writing Magazine* and the judges' decision will be final with no correspondence being entered into.

5 Notification
Winners will be notified within three months of closing date after which date unplaced entries may be submitted elsewhere. Winning entries may not be submitted elsewhere for twelve months after that date without permission of *Writing Magazine* who retain the right to publish winning entries in any form during those twelve months.

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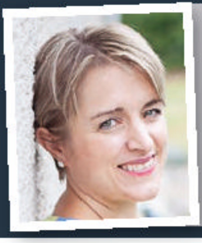

The writing life is full of exhilarating highs and crashing lows. No wonder **Gillian Harvey** is hooked.

The next hit

This month, I want to ask you a question.

Do you like writing?

The simple answer to this might be 'well DUH! I'm reading a magazine called '*Writing Magazine*', full of hints and tips and articles on writing. What do you think?'

But I'm talking about the actual process of doing it. Of sitting down at a desk and putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and grinding out hundreds of words.

Do you ever sit at your writing desk and wonder to yourself: am I having fun yet?

Because I'll admit it's a question I ask myself at times.

I mean obviously never when I'm writing this column which is an absolute joy-fest from start to finish.

But sometimes, during moments of block or on days when the cogs in my brain need oiling and won't turn smoothly; or at times when I'm sitting at my PC, fighting over how to describe a character, or get the plot to move from A to B, I realise I am NOT enjoying myself.

When someone asks me whether I like writing, the answer is always: 'I LOVE IT.'

But what I should really say is: 'How much time have you got?'

Because the truth is not as simple as that.

The experience of writing is full of ups and downs. Praise when a short story is well received; a friend's comment on your latest manuscript; a yes from an editor can have us soaring. Criticism (sometimes, even well-meant), looming deadlines and proof-reading can make us feel thoroughly fed up.

I suppose it's unrealistic to just have one feeling about something with so many highs and lows. I both love writing and hate it – and the balance between these points can shift depending on both internal and external events.

Things I love about writing:

- The anticipation of writing. That feeling of knowing you've carved out a couple of hours in which to write.
- Tea breaks (especially with chocolate biscuits)
- The aftermath – print-outs, readthroughs, pressing send on a submission.
- Good reviews!
- Sometimes… money.

Things I don't love:

- The moment after pressing send when I realise I've missed a spelling mistake.
- Actually putting words down on screen or paper (at least, sometimes).
- The self-doubt that seems to follow me around no matter how well I'm doing.
- Printer jams, cold offices and bad reviews.

You might be familiar with Dorothy Parker's famous words: 'I hate writing, I love having written.'

And I suppose this is exactly what I'm trying to describe.

So what keeps us going? The answer may be different for all of us. For me it's the thought of that eventual payoff: the reading it back to myself, the looking at a thick pile of printed paper and marvelling that I've managed to create a world of words.

It is knowing that this 'reward' is coming that keeps me going when my fingers or my brain or my imagination refuses to play ball. Or in those moments when I realise I'm spending my time giving imaginary characters great adventures when most of my life is spent sitting on an office chair with varying levels of mild lower-back pain.

(I've recently finished a novel which features a close-knit group of friends. And realised, during edits, that I am living vicariously through my characters. Instead of seeing my actual friends (either one or both of them), I'm spending time with imaginary ones. My fictional celebration of friendship has kept me from having proper friendships myself. Ah, the irony.)

Anyway, just as I despair, I reach that final full stop or chapter end and suddenly BOOM: a sense of satisfaction akin to that a long-distance runner feels when torso hits ribbon. And at that moment all the misery and head scratching and cursing at the screen just disappears.

Reader, it's magic.

(I mean. I say magic. Science has a different word for it: dopamine. The feel-good chemical which floods our senses with feelings of satisfaction when we've achieved a task.

But what does science know, really?

I like to think of myself as inspired rather than craving my next hit. Like to think of myself as a creative creature rather than a chemically dependent one. And plus, if what I'm really craving is a dopamine hit, there are easier ways to achieve one. Like snorting cocaine or bungee jumping or – for the adventurous – both simultaneously).

Still, I choose writing. And just maybe that's because deep down, even when I hate it, I love it really.

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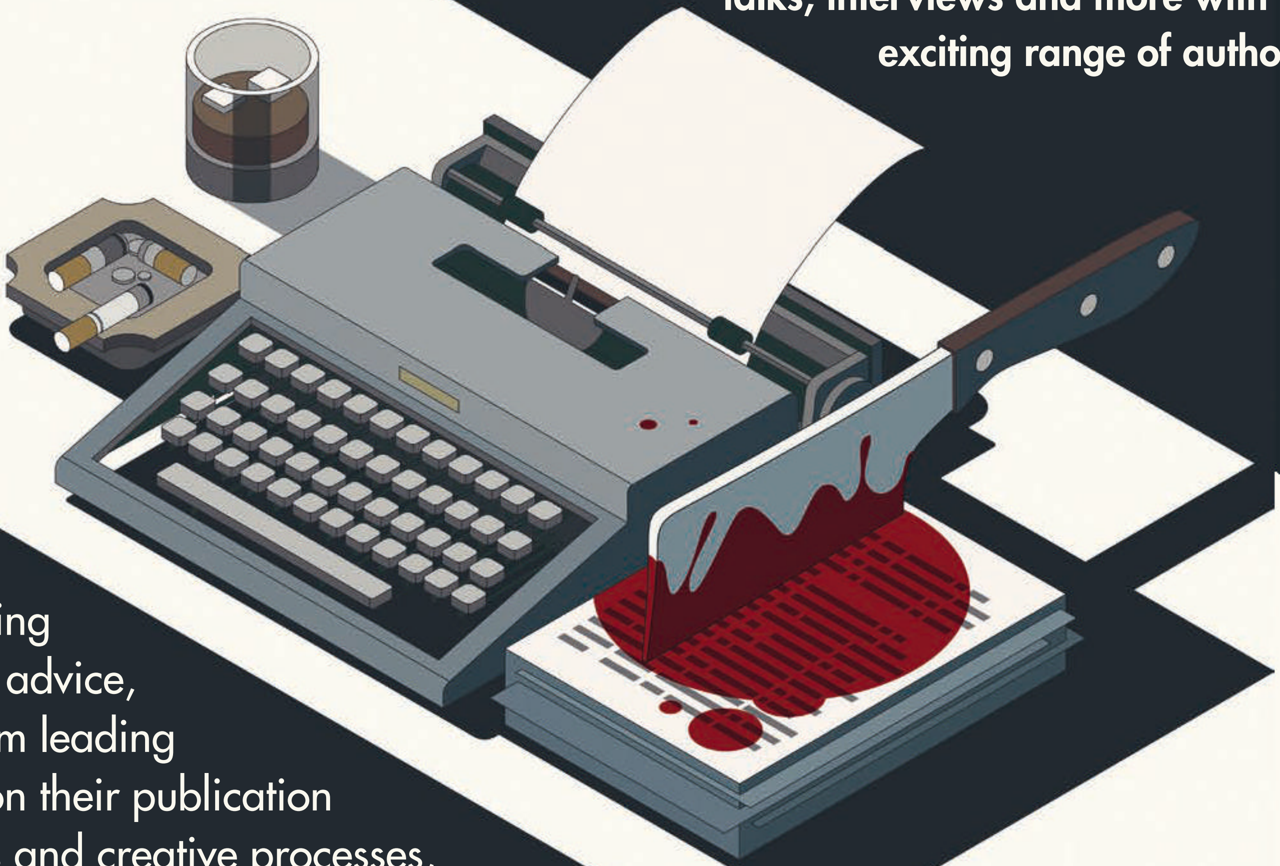

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